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The "Communication Deficit" of the European Union revisited

- Structures, Key Players and the New Communication Policy -

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To My Mother

I Introduction

"The European Union (EU) is a success story that nobody is interested in". This is, in essence, the rather painful paradox that many *Eurocrats* are wearily reminded of whenever they chat about the EU's growing role in the world – to an essentially disinterested public. From the perspective of the academic observer, this may well have to do with the fact that particularly the Brussels-based advocates of this unique form of supranational cooperation appear to be slightly biased by an inherent sympathy for the common project and, as a result, are largely immune to critical reflection. This might possibly be the case, yet even the most sceptic EU critic will have to concede that there are a number of strong claims to be made in favour of the EU and its past achievements. Perhaps most remarkably, the European project has successfully challenged the traditional notion of political governance as the sole preserve of the nation state. In a multilateral world that has entered the phase of postnationalism the specific European form of a supranational alliance has come to act as a role model for international cooperation in other parts of the world and has inspired the development of local organisations such as Mercosur, ASEAN, or the African Union. The increasing appeal of multilateral power sharing has also not gone unnoticed in the United States where advocates of power politics in the realist tradition observe the European Union's capacity to maintain a functioning form of "network governance" with habitual scepticism, yet not without a degree of tentative admiration (cf. Sloterdijk 2005: 25f).[1] In terms of its universal appeal,

[1] Bestsellers such as Jeremy Rifkin's "The European Dream – How Europe's vision of the future is quietly eclipsing the American dream" (2004) and T.R. Reid's "The United States of Europe: The New Superpower and the End of American Supremacy" (2004) seem to indicate a growing trend among American scholars and journalists to look at the European model as a rediscovered source of inspiration.

Europe has even been regarded as the only remaining "realpolitical utopia" (Beck/Grande 2004).

This being said, there can be no question about the fact that the European success story has become somewhat flawed in recent years, most obviously reflected by the failed attempt to introduce a common European constitution in 2005 and the painstakingly long-winded efforts that accompanied the adoption of its successor, the Lisbon Treaty. Hitherto, the Union had suffered various crises and setbacks, e.g. the failed Maastricht referendum in Denmark, the resignation of the Santer Commission, reports about mismanagement and agricultural overproduction etc., to name just a few. However, the rejection of constitutional reform as manifested by the negative outcome of the referenda in France, The Netherlands and Ireland seem to indicate a new quality: in many ways, they can be perceived as manifestations of a "creeping euroscepticism" that has taken place in recent years and that is marked by a general disenchantment of citizens with the European project. Particularly the "no" votes by the founding members France and The Netherlands have touched upon the very basic foundations of the EU as they marked a clear stop signal to the further development of the Union. Prominent critics claim that European institutions have acquired an undue measure of competences and that the role of member states has been diminished to an unacceptable, because democracy-eroding degree. European citizens, so the frequently applied diagnosis, have become estranged from the European project and what they feel as a sealed-off elite in Brussels that is governing over their heads (cf. Habermas 2005).

Although there is much evidence for the occurrence of second order effects and the assumption that citizens in those member states – at least to a certain degree – used the referendum to express their disagreement with domestic policies rather than a vote on the European Constitution, the contradictory reasons that were named in post-referendum opinion polls indicate that neither the significance of this European decision became successfully communicated, nor

were incorrect counterarguments sufficiently rebutted (cf. Taggart 2006). In short: the constitutional crisis of the European Union can indeed be seen as much as a crisis of communication as a crisis of confidence. The apparent impossibility of communicating with its citizens is what has commonly become known as the EU's "communication deficit".

The effects of this lack of communication can be empirically measured by looking at a number of parameters. There is, for instance, the extremely low extent of knowledge about EU matters in the general public. A Eurobarometer opinion poll, conducted in Mai 2006, sums it up boldly when stating that there is "near-zero knowledge and understanding of the functioning of the Union, its institutions and their role" (European Commission 2006a). It was not least because of such knowledge gaps that the EU referenda in the above mentioned countries became "hijacked" by issues that actually bore no reference to the actual topic. Apart from those shortcomings in communication that become visible in the context of referenda and factual knowledge, the EU's problem in communicating with the general public manifests itself first and foremost in a very basic sense: extensive and widespread indifference – reflected by the obvious discrepancy between the EU's highly significant influence on the political processes on the one hand and the near absence of a public debate on the EU's actions on the other.

This is most visibly echoed in the media coverage on EU affairs. Today, approximately 75 % of national legislation is strongly affected by decisions taken in the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council.[2] The number of binding European legal acts has nearly trebled within the

[2] The exact share of legislation that can be traced back to decisions on the EU level remains the subject of debate: whereas European *regulations* are immediately binding in their entirety and have a direct impact on domestic legislation, European *directives* set a framework within which national legislators can operate. European *recommendations*, though not binding, may also be adhered to in a considerable number of cases. Depending on how the European influence is operationalised, numbers vary between 40 per cent and 90 per cent (cf. Arbia 2006), yet the figure

past two decades and, through its economic strength as well as its developing common foreign and security policy, the EU has become an increasingly influential player on the world stage (cf. Wessels 2008: 22-25). The decisive impact of the EU, also indicated by the broadening spectrum of the vast number of lobbying groups and interest representations that are active in Brussels (cf. Jarren et al. 2007: 353 f), stands in marked contrast to its representation in the media. As a broad number of studies on the media coverage on EU issues have shown, coverage in general public media is "barely existent, homogeneous and mostly negative" (e.g. Peter/Lauf 2004, similarly de Vreese 2003). Even in times when EU issues feature more prominently in the media, such as during the 1999 Helsinki summit where fundamental decisions were taken about Europe's future enlargement and integration with far-reaching consequences for European citizens, a public debate was largely absent and information provision seen as "deficient" (cf. Gerhards 2000: 277f).

1. Research Interest: A Deficient EU Media Relations Policy?

The "communication deficit" finds its most visible refection in the apparent difficulty of the European institutions to connect with citizens by way of a public debate. Unlike in a domestic national context, there seems to be no equivalent in the form of a "European Public Sphere" that could act as an intermediary between Europe and its citizens. In particular, the European Union seems to fail in informing citizens via their familiar media. Eurobarometer surveys time and again indicate that people feel insufficiently informed about European topics (cf. European Commission 2008a: 42) and that the media feature "too little" rather than "too much" about the European Union (European Commission 2005: 17).

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of 75 per cent seems to meet with a broad consensus and has been frequently referred to by advocates, as well as opponents of the EU (cf. Pöttering 2009, in: Die Welt).

This suggests a certain deficiency on the part of EU political public relations: journalists in the UK, for instance, apparently feel that the EU is failing to actively provide the material they need and do not recognise how much that material should be organised around the particular interests of a targeted audience (cf. Golding/Oldfield, 2006: 138). In a similar vein Koopmans and Pfetsch (2003), as well as de Vreese (2003), have argued that the low representation of European issues and actors might not necessarily originate in the disinterest on the part of the media, but could be related to the information input provided by their sources. The EU's "communication deficit" would thus be to blame, at least to a certain extent, on a failed EU communication policy.

The present analysis wants to examine the validity of such claims by way of a case study focussing on EU media relations[3] and the role of the European Commission's spokesperson service in this process. Based on the assumption that the media coverage on EU issues must be seen as a product of an interaction process between political communication professionals and media correspondents (cf. Jarren/Donges 2006: 279), the study pursues three objectives:

- O*n an empirical level*, it seeks to analyse the specific European factors that influence the work of political communication professionals in their daily routine by way of a case study. How do European spokespersons differ in their work routines from their national counterparts? Under which conditions

[3] The term "media relations" in the context of this study refers to the routine information exchange between spokespersons and journalists. As such, "media relations" forms one of the instruments within the mix of political public relations tools. As an analytical term "media relations" is more neutral in tone than "newsmanagement" or "spin control" which rather emphasise the manipulative aspect of information provision. Yet, as these concepts often refer to very similar practices of information provision, they shall be used as synonyms in the sense that they refer to the more functional aspects of information provision to journalists in demarcation to more openly "affirmative" political public relations tools such as advertising, publicity events or image campaigns.

do they operate? What impact do these conditions have on the media coverage of European issues? The analysis of context factors are expected to offer additional insights as to why European topics are found to be underrepresented in the public (media)discourse.

- *On a theoretical level*, these impact factors will be evaluated in the wider context of existing European Public Sphere research. The analysis seeks to place the role of information exchange between spokespersons and correspondents into a broader institutional and systemic framework. The concepts of "legitimacy through communication" (cf. Ronneberger 1996, Sarcinelli 1998) and "legitimacy through public relations" (cf. Brüggeman 2008, Meyer 2002) have emphasised the importance of public discourse for democratic systems and have highlighted the role of political communication professionals in the creation of such a discourse. How can the interplay between legitimacy, communication flows and audiences in the EU multilevel system under these conditions be conceptualised? The information objectives of spokespersons in multilevel systems may differ from those of spokespersons in a domestic setting, particularly with regard to issues such as complexity, segmented audiences and transnationalised media outlets. In order to evaluate the performance of European institutions' media relations, a theoretical embedding of media relations activities into the European context seems indispensible (cf. Hahn et al. 2006a).

- *On a practical level* the opportunities for improving EU media relations will be explored on the basis of the findings of the case study and their theoretical implications for communication initiatives that may be devised in the future. Which are the most adequate measures that can be undertaken in order to overcome the "communication deficit" in the context of the results of this

study? What is the scope of EU media relations? Which role can the EU representations in the member states realistically play in this process?

2. Research Gap: Routine Information Provision in the EU

The scope of research on EU communication has significantly evolved over the last two decades. Whereas questions about the legitimacy of the European Union in the pre-Maastricht era tended to focus more on the Union's institutional design or matters of constitutional law (and thus forming the classic preserve of political scientists), the Danish "no" on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 shifted attention towards the importance of public opinion and the role of the media in connection with the democratic accountability of the European institutions. The concept of the "European Public Sphere", in particular, has triggered a rich body of theoretical approaches and empirical studies. In recent years, a number of content analyses have looked at the frequency and salience with which "European institutions", "European actors" or "European issues" have become the subject of media reports. Depending on the approach, most content-analysis-based studies have set out to find support for the emergence (or, more often, non-emergence) of a European Public Sphere and, where a longitudinal design was employed, trends towards a "Europeanisation" of national public spheres.[4]

On the media production side, studies have reflected the impact of editorial policies, journalistic routines and peer orientation in the Brussels press corps,[5] while on the other side, concerning the political public relations system of the

[4] For a comprehensive overview on European Public Sphere concepts please cf. Latzer/Saurwein 2006, Brüggemannn et al. 2009, chapter III.2.1.

[5] For an overview on political journalism in Brussels cf. Raeymaeckers et al. 2007, cf. Anderson/Weymouth 1999, Baisnée 2003, Hahn et al. 2006, Golding/Oldfield 2006, Kevin 2003. Most editorial studies argue from the perspective of new institutionalism and emphasise how media organisations shape the behaviour of their individual members.

European Union, the focus has mostly been placed on issue campaigns,[6] referenda or key events such as elections or summits.[7] A still comparatively under-researched area is the routine information provision of EU institutions to the media[8] and the activities of EU spokespersons in particular. While there is a considerable body of research on newsmanagement, spin-doctoring and political public relations in the national context,[9] only few publications deal with the specific media relations of EU institutions.[10] Brüggemann, in his study on the limited effects of the enlargement campaign, concludes that reaching a broader scope of people could fist of all by achieved by focussing on media relations instead of PR campaigns (cf. Brüggemann 2009: 277).

The area of routine information provision, however, could greatly supplement the findings of content-analysis-based research with a view to complementing the bigger picture, as Meyer remarks:

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[6] E.g. Valentini 2006, Brüggemann 2008.

[7] Esser/de Vreese 2007, de Vreese/Boomgarden 2007, de Vreese/Tobiasen 2007, Hix/Marsh 2007, de Vreese/Semetko 2004, Schuck/de Vreese 2006, de Vreese et al. 2006, Dinan 2006, Taggart 2006, Hobolt 2005, de Vreese 2005, Garry et al. 2005, Peter/Lauf 2004, Peter 2003, Banducci/Semetko 2003, Bonfadelli 1995.

[8] For routine coverage in Germany cf. Eilders/Voltmer 2003, and for a rare example of TV coverage with regard to non-key event periods cf. Peter/deVreese 2004.

[9] E.g. Tenscher 2003, Esser/Spanier 2003, Esser et al 2000, Scammell 2001, Pfetsch 1998.

[10] Laudable exceptions include Meyer 1999 with a focus on the crisis of the Santer-Commission, Gramberger 1997 with an overtime overview on EU public relations activities, Tak 1999 on the organisation structure of EU public relations, Hahn et al. 2006 and Balčytienė et al. 2007 on EU newsmanagement. In the wake of the European White Paper on Communication Policy 2006a, the interest in EU media relations has markedly improved and while most of the studies mentioned make reference to the work of EU spokespersons in a broader public relations context, a comprehensive analysis of the exchange relations between EU spokespersons and journalists and their impact on media coverage has not yet been conducted.

> "Content analysis alone is insufficient to grasp the factors, actors and structures which shape political communication. It can provide only few insights about how EU coverage is actually produced in the interplay of EU actors, interest groups, and political journalism." (Meyer 2000: 12)

Indeed, interpretations drawn on the basis of content analyses alone are likely to present only one side of the coin, in particular when the media are seen as the culprits for the European "communication deficit": "If studies demonstrate that media coverage largely neglects European politics, the blame must not necessarily lie with the media themselves, but may lie with the information input that is provided by their sources" (Koopmans/Pfetsch 2003: 4).

In a larger theoretical context, Eder/Kantner (2000: 323 *author's own translation*) have asked about the point "where European political communication emerges" and "which specific opportunities 'Europe' offers for the emergence of such communicative processes". Neidhardt (2006: 53 *author's own translation*) sees a lack of process-based models "in which the decisive variances can be observed and described on multiple levels". In the context of political communication and information provision in multilevel systems, research also suggests the need for a "European approach" to the concept of newsmanagement (cf. Hahn et al. 2006). On the basis of the practical analysis of the spokesperson-journalist relationship and by taking into account structural as well as institutional factors that guide the communication flow in Brussels, the study aims to offer an integrative theoretical model that accounts for the interrelations between information provision, media coverage and audience orientation.

3. Structure of the Study

The study is divided into six chapters: after the introduction in chapter I, chapter II provides a closer look at the problem at hand. It analyses the different aspects of

the EU "communication deficit" on the basis of an historical overview of EU crises and their communication dimension since the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. Secondly, the chapter describes the response of EU institutions by scrutinizing the most important communication initiatives since Maastricht. An evaluation of these outcomes will show that, to date, the initiatives have had only limited impact with regard to the objective of "closing the communication gap" and also indicate the need for a better theoretical understanding of the "communication deficit" and its roots and causes.

Chapter III deals with the foundations of an integrated European communication concept in that it examines the basic interrelations between democratic legitimacy and communication. As democratic legitimacy in multilevel systems is essentially different from the practices applied in nation state models, an exhaustive discussion of the – real or alleged – democratic deficit of the European Union is a key factor for the subsequent evaluation of European Public Sphere concepts. The chapter closes with a theoretical re-evaluation of the "communication deficit" notion by distinguishing between two dimensions of political communication with regard to separate audiences.

Based on the insights of the previous chapter, chapter IV sets out to develop a general framework for political communication in the EU. The chapter describes a number of specific European conditions that act as context factors in the communication process and which simultaneously underpin communication logics in Brussels and the member states: the EU's functionalist tradition, multilevel phenomena such as the "blame game" and the "collective action problem", the intricate decision-making process and the limited scope of a European identity and a European media system. In a second step, the chapter reflects on the impact of these factors with regard to the interrelations of "complexity", "political communication" and "reception" and their effects on communicating European issues to the general public. On the basis of these insights, a model for the empirical analysis of the interaction process between EU-

spokespersons and media correspondents in Brussels is developed. The routine information provision of spokespersons to journalists is thereby embedded within a broader framework reflecting a two-fold orientation towards an expert audience and a general public audience.

Chapter V comprises the actual case study based on 22 semi-structured interviews with the European Commission spokesperson service and Heads of Media in selected member state representations. The interviews were guided by research questions that inquired about the nature of the communication flows in Brussels by investigating the impact of specific European context factors, the role of different media outlets and the orientation towards certain audiences. Spokespersons were also asked to evaluate a set of frequently quoted reasons for the traditional "communication deficit" notion and to critically reflect upon the Commission's communication initiatives. The findings of the case study are displayed in a quantitative and a qualitative section. They reveal a number of factors that apparently contribute to an expert orientation of European media relations and a preference for written press media outlets. Marked differences can be observed in the way issues are perceived by the media depending on the nature of the portfolio and the degree of the EU's competence in a policy field. In spite of forming the prime source of information for the general public, the audiovisual media still appear to play a secondary role in EU newsmanagement activities although considerable efforts are under way to change this pattern. The absence of a common monitoring system for TV media is regarded as a key component in this context. However, the findings also suggest that the complexity of the EU institutional setting along with a number of other factors appear to provide strong structural constraints that inherently limit the scope for a more general public oriented media relations approach. The role of the representations in member states is evaluated with regard to the "going local" strategy as outlined in the White Paper on Communication Policy. While the role of the representations was

universally recognised by the SPP, it also became clear that the remoteness from the Brussels decision-making centre limits their scope of action.

Chapter VI discusses the findings against the backdrop of the theoretical assumptions made in the previous chapters and reflects upon the usefulness of a functional distinction of expert and general public audiences in the European context. Based on this model, the chapter seeks to provide a realistic evaluation of the possibilities and limitations of EU media relations activities with regard to "closing the communication gap" and offers suggestions for further research in this field.

II The "Communication Deficit" of the European Union

The European Union's "communication deficit", in its ubiquity and persistence, has been described as "legendary" (Trenz 2008: 50). Although it has often been referred to, it is not entirely clear which shortcoming this deficit attempts to label: a shortcoming of communicative processes within the institutions? A lack of communication with the various stakeholders in the policy process? A deficit in understanding between European government structures and the European citizens? While many of these "deficit" notions make inherently normative assumptions, others appear to argue from a functional perspective. In order to clarify the term for empirical analysis, one could look at measurable indicators for such a deficit.

As far as the *qualitative* dimension of EU coverage is concerned, studies have observed a change in tone: according to research carried out by Leroy/Siune (1994) and Reiser (1994) in the mid-nineties, coverage on the 1979 European elections was still predominantly positive whereas in 1994 this had already changed to the negative. Recent research suggests that, despite indicators for an increase of EU related coverage in the broadsheet press (cf. Lucht/Tréfas 2006) the negative trend in reporting on EU issues has not been reversed.

As far as the *quantitative* dimension of coverage is concerned, the high political salience of union policy issues is found to be in stark contrast to a marginalised debate in the European public. Gerhards (2000: 278) astonishingly remarks the near-absence of a public debate even during EU political peak moments such as the 1999 "enlargement summit": despite constituting a historic milestone for the EU, the initially high coverage soon dropped to low levels again. As far as the routine coverage of EU policies is concerned, Eilders/Volmer (2003) have shown in an over time analysis that even in the political commentaries section of quality press newspapers, the European Union only accounts for six per cent of the articles (as opposed to 80 per cent national topics and around 10 per

cent foreign news), and a mere 2 per cent mention European political actors or one of the institutions.[11]

On a more general level, the debate on European issues is marked by strikingly low levels of public knowledge about the institutions of the European Union. Despite an increase in information and awareness campaigns and a series of EU initiatives to improve communication since the early 1990s, knowledge about Europe has not significantly improved. Research on EU promotional campaigns suggests that over a period of four years of EU campaigning no significant changes took place in terms of improving the image and the trust in the EU institutions (cf. Valentini 2006: 88). The aforementioned Eurobarometer survey states that the EU's main decision-making body, the Council, is "practically completely unknown as an institution" and that "the institutional workings of the Union and how decisions are taken is a matter of nearly complete ignorance" (European Commission 2006a: 11). These findings must be regarded as all the more troubling from the perspective of the European institutions, as low levels of knowledge are likely to correspond with highly volatile and mood dependent attitude (cf. Wirth/Matthes 2006). Indeed, large sectors of the general public are found to have a fairly negative perception of the decision-making process in the EU (cf. Norris 2000: 199).

Commentators, such as Habermas, have linked some of the crises that the EU has suffered in recent decades directly to the seeming inability of the EU to communicate with its citizens (cf. Habermas 2008: 99). From this perspective, EU crises can be read as the most visible manifestations of the "communication deficit". For the empirical analysis it is therefore illuminating to take a closer look at these crises and their communicative aspects in order to obtain a clearer picture of the debate.

[11] Trenz (2004) found higher levels of coverage due to different operationalisation (cf. also chapter IV.1.6).

1. A "Problem" of Communication? A brief History of EU Crises

1.1 The failed Ratification of the European Constitution

After the successful enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and the inclusion of 10 new member states, just one year later, the failed attempt to introduce a common European Constitution triggered serious doubts about Europe's ability to continue its evolution. When asked about ratifying the European constitution in a referendum, 55 per cent of French voters cast their vote against the implementation of the document. Only three days later, on the 1st June 2005, 61.8 per cent of voters in The Netherlands also rejected the proposal.

This negative outcome in two of the Union's founding member states was widely perceived as an earthquake shattering the foundations of the European project, and large parts of the media subsequently saw Europe in "its deepest crisis for fifty years" (e.g. Presseschau *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 04.06.05). The supposed crisis was regarded as a crisis of "confidence" and of "identity", in danger of threatening the entire integration process (cf. Dinan 2006: 63). There is without a doubt some truth in such claims; however, when evaluating their impact, one has to put the decision in these two countries into perspective. The situation after the votes was that out of 27 member states, 18 had already ratified the constitution and in 6 countries the ratification process was pending or suspended. Apart from France and The Netherlands, a public referendum was held also in Spain where 77 per cent of people voted in favour of the Constitution and in Luxemburg where 57 per cent voted "yes". Against that backdrop, the very bleak picture of a Constitution turned down by the "European people" has to be readjusted.

In the context of successful referenda on the European Constitution in other countries, it seems important to take a closer look at the underlying motives for the "no" votes in France and The Netherlands. The public debate can be broadly distinguished into two strands: firstly, the rejection is seen as the culmination of a "creeping euroscepticism" that has taken place in recent years

and that is marked by a general disenchantment with the European project. The underlying assumption is that the Constitution was rejected because the people in those countries disagreed with its content and the current state of the European Union, particularly the lack of democratic participation. The second strand argues that the referendum on the Constitution was a "second-order vote" and primarily used by people to express their disagreement with domestic policy matters or disagreement with a person. It is of course likely that a combination of both motives played a role in the decision-making process. Leaning towards the first strand of arguments, Habermas has criticised the disconnection he perceives between political parties and the voting public:

> "Der […] Protest hat sich gegen die politische Klasse im Ganzen gerichtet. In ihm drückt sich der demokratische Impuls aus, einen über die Köpfe der Wähler hinweg rollenden Prozess anzuhalten, wenigstens für einen Augenblick zu unterbrechen. Das ‚Nein' ist auch ein Widerspruch gegen das falsche Bewusstsein von Parteien, die sich offenbar in der Luhmannschen Beschreibung des politischen Systems wiedererkennen und sich nur noch strategisch der störenden Geräusche aus der Umwelt der Wahlbevölkerung erwehren." (Habermas 2005, in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 06.06.2005)

This estimation was echoed in many editorials within the European press that perpetuated a perceived lack of democratic participation on the European level and people's vague fear of a further loss of national sovereignty. These arguments however seem paradox in the light of the actual Constitutional text that would have granted the European public with *more* participatory rights than those existing under the Treaty of Nice. As Sedelmeier/Young (2005: 4) note: "the failure to ratify the Constitutional Treaty may matter most in terms of the legitimacy of EU decision-making, by not extending the Parliament's influence. This is somewhat ironic as it was plebiscitary democracy that derailed the process".

So what are the grounds for the argument? The often quoted "loss of national sovereignty" mainly refers to the extension of qualified majority voting to areas that hitherto required unanimity. This in effect severely limits the possibilities of a single state blocking a certain policy. It is probably here that many citizens feared losing a final means of vetoing European decisions to the benefit of national interests (cf. Göler 2006: 205). However, the step-by-step expansion of the principle of qualified majority voting had been a feature in all previous treaties. Given the fact that unanimous decision-making becomes increasingly unlikely the more members take part in the decision-making process, the driver behind expanding qualified majority voting has been the objective of maintaining procedural efficiency rather than the grand scheme of a "European Superstate" (cf. Brok 2004). Besides, it is important to note that regardless of an expansion of majority voting in some areas, the most vital decisions would have remained subject to unanimity (and the possibility to veto) and that the Constitution would have introduced another democratic element specifically designed to return some sort of control on national sovereignty to the member states by giving national parliaments the opportunity to have their say in the early stages of the European legislative process ("early warning system") (cf. Wessels 2008: 304). In addition, the constitution would have greatly strengthened the role of the European regions, attaching higher importance and more authority to local decision-making bodies, thus adding to the objective of bringing Europe closer to its citizens (cf. Schmuck 2006: 138). As far as the adjustments in the voting system are concerned, Weidenfeld/Wessels (2006: 43) regard the constitution's provision of the "double majority" in the Council votings, i.e. the majority of citizens and member states, instead of the system of a threefold majority as provided by the Nice Treaty, as an "important breakthrough" towards more democratic legitimacy (cf. also chapter IV.1.3). Perhaps most importantly is the

open and transparent mode in which the European Convention operated while drafting the European constitution.[12] Not only consisting of publicly elected parliamentarians, national and European, the Convention provided opportunities for public participation by way of a "forum of civil society". The Convention sessions were open to the public and minutes were regularly published on the European Parliament's website (cf. Göler 2006: 205). In sum, the negative outcome of the referenda in France and The Netherlands hint at a fundamental misperception of the constitution by the voting public. One of the most important aspects of the constitution, namely the introduction of further participatory and direct democratic elements did not seem to have registered with the voter, while the arguments of the "no" campaign seem to have done so, despite the implicit contradiction in their line of argumentation.

The second explanation for the failed ratification process is the assumption that the vote on the constitution was primarily used to express disagreement with domestic policies (France) or to express disagreement with a certain EU policy not related to the Constitution as such (The Netherlands). Judging from opinion polls preceding the referendum in France, large parts of the French public resented President Chirac's perceived autocratic style in which he presented the Constitution to the people in order to "nod it through". In addition to that, in France and The Netherlands, the Constitution was turned into a symbol of for a new neoliberal, Anglo-Saxon model of society. Particularly in France, the fear of globalisation, job losses and inferior social services was pervasive (cf. Dinan

[12] In the aftermath of the negotiations to the Nice Treaty, the European Council adopted the "Laeken Declaration" in 2001 committing the European Union to greater democracy, transparency and efficiency. Instead of negotiating new treaties in an Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) purely on the executive level of governments, future drafts should be developed by a "European Convention" comprising the main societal stakeholders. Chaired by former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the 105 members of the Convention deliberated in public and produced a "draft Constitution" that was handed over to the IGC in 2004.

2006: 67). This – rather simplistic – conclusion was not least a result of the heated debate surrounding the controversial "service directive", a Commission directive initially designed to cut bureaucracy and give service providers all over Europe easier access to the internal market. In the wake of the latest EU enlargement process and the debate on the compatibility of the "European social model" with a further liberalisation of markets, the service directive itself became emblematic for a much feared lowering of social standards in Europe (cf. Dinan 2006: 67).[13] Whereas one would like to see the "no" vote on the constitution as a vote against Chirac, or a statement of disapproval against the service directive or other EU policies, or an expression of a fear of a "European Superstate" (embodied by the very word "Constitution") in which national idiosyncrasies will disappear – what all these motives have in common is that they stand less for a general disagreement with the European project[14] but rather for a misperception of the actual content of the Constitution.

Research widely agrees on the fact that domestic politics formed the key variables in the 2005 European referenda (cf. Taggard 2006, de Vreese/Boomgarden 2005, Dinan 2006). If those second-order effects took place, this also means that the French and the Dutch governments did not succeed in communicating the significance of the decision on the European Constitution as a strong issue outside the national context, namely to highlight the European "added value" over domestic disaccords.

Supporters of the "no" campaigns were much better organised than the those of the "yes" campaigns whose communication work in many cases (e.g. in

[13] The debate surrounding the service directive created a public impression that the liberalisation of the service market would invariable lead to an influx of cheap and low quality service providers particularly from the newly acceded Eastern European States. As the "principle of the country of origin" was dropped during the legislative process most arguments were essentially left unfounded.

[14] Cf. Chapter II.1.4 and support for EU-membership.

The Netherlands but also in Luxemburg) started very late in the process (cf. Taggart 2006: 18). Another reason is that an effective communication had to overcome a paradox: compared, for instance, to the Maastricht Treaty (which had presented a "quantum leap" ahead in integration) the institutional changes contained in the draft text were comparatively low-key and stood in stark contrast to the grand label "Constitution" and the emotional implications attached to it. For many voters, however, the term "Constitution" tended to evoke fears about a "European Superstate" and without even knowing the text, their initial response resulted in a dismissive reflex. In this rather difficult psychological context and when the challenge is to find an operational agreement, it is of little help that Eurobarometer opinion polls suggest that more than 60 per cent of EU citizens feel in principle in favour of a European constitution (cf. Amato 2007, in: *Die Zeit* 25.01.2007). Yet it is difficult to imagine an information campaign that would focus on playing down the changes instituted by the text as the public reaction would invariably be to ask why one should one on such a text in the first place, let alone why it should be labelled a "Constitution".

While the technical aspects of the information campaign preceding the ratification were carried out under the respective member states' own responsibility, there are serious doubts as to whether there could have been more efforts on a European level to promote the positive aspects of the Constitution or at least counter the often incorrect accusation made by various "no" campaigns. These apparent shortcomings in the EU's strategic communication can also be observed in earlier crises and setbacks which will be briefly outlined in the following, as these prominent examples demonstrate the lingering tensions within the European institutions and the member states in terms of communication over the years.

1.2 The Fall of the Santer Commission in 1999

The extraordinary events that led to the fall of the Commission chaired by the former Luxemburg Prime Minister Jacques Santer 1999 can be seen as a prime example for the intricacies of the Union's multilayered communication process. The 1999 crisis was also one of the rare occasions that triggered a strong Europe-wide media interest in its wake (cf. Gerhards 2005: 301) and which reflected the increasing role of the Brussels press corps as watchdogs (cf. Meyer 2000: 184). In addition, the personalities of individual Commissioners became known to the public either as the object of criticism or as commentators on the events.

The crisis was sparked by a confrontation between the Commission and the Parliament when the latter refused to ratify the budget as a result of numerous cases of misconduct which became public in the course of the year. The Commission civil servant Paul van Buitenen had collected evidence for incidents of corruption and nepotism in his Directorate General and, after internal control services had failed to react to his report, had forwarded the documents to the European Parliament. The European Parliament hereupon launched an inquiry into this affair and asked an independent group of experts to inquire about the irregularities. When the group eventually presented its findings, the validity of all of van Buitenen's claims were confirmed, including evidence of improper behaviour on the part of several commissioners themselves. The European Parliament then threatened to prepare a motion of no-confidence against the *college* of Commissioners.[15] Although the allegations of misconduct only concerned individual members of the college, notably the French Commissioner Edith Cresson, and no act of misconduct could be proved against the President of the Commission himself (cf. Committee of Independent Experts 1999: 139), the EU institutional framework does not allow for a vote of no-confidence against individual Commissioners. Santer, anticipating the negative outcome of such a

[15] The French term *college* signifies the Commission cabinet in its entirety.

motion, had no other choice but to resign collectively with his team of Commissioners if he did not want to suffer the humiliating defeat that would surely follow such a vote in Parliament.

The media attention devoted to this case was unprecedented – for the first time, the Commission became the subject of an investigative type of journalism that hitherto had been limited to national governments. Representatives of the Commission spokesperson service admitted that, at the time, the significance of this new type of investigative journalism was underestimated. Meyer, in analysing journalists' views on the crisis, found that the Commission was not only slow to react to accusations of misconduct but also badly organised. Journalists responded that "the press work of the Commission was a case study in how not to do it" (Meyer 1999: 625). The style of communication was described as being defensive and hostile rather than putting the facts on the table in an effort to attract credibility through open dialogue.

In addition, the Commission's communicative response to the Santer crisis also revealed the underlying structural problems of the EU: particularly in times of a crisis, people tend to regard the Commission as a sort of "government" and expect that its president should be able to bring his people into line. However, this is neglecting the very limited powers of the Commission president in comparison to a national head of state and the primarily administrative and non-partisan nature of the Commission (cf. Meyer 1999: 626). In evaluating the inner workings of the crisis, the group of independent experts observed a "poor state of internal communication", an information culture marked by "misinformation, leaks and indiscretions" and insufficient internal control mechanisms (Committee of Independent Experts 1999: 66, 139). Indeed, the intricate flow of internal communication, effectively preventing Commissioners from reacting swiftly, because of the uncertainty with regard to the reliability of information formed a core problem within the European institutions. Naturally, the reasons for the Santer Commission's demise were complex and not only limited to matters of

communication: individual failures of Commissioners, a European Parliament adamant about using its newly acquired power, a generally critical attitude to European integration amongst the public, constituted significant underlying factors that contributed to the scenario of a crisis spinning out of control (cf. Topan 2002: 1). However, as Meyer (1999: 635) sums it up in his account of the events, "the Commission's inability to cope with mounting media pressure was the single most important factor behind its forced resignation."

The crisis had an immediate effect on the incoming Prodi Commission which pledged to improve the communication strategy in view of lessons learned from the events in the past. However, while Santer's successor Romano Prodi succeeded in initiating some administrative reforms in such areas as financial management or human resources, progress in improving the existing communication policy remained marginal at best. It was left to the Barroso Commission to show its commitment to this matter by appointing Commission Vice President Margot Wallström as a Commissioner with a specific communication portfolio. This was widely regarded as more than just a symbolic move, clearly indicating a new importance given to EU communication policy.

1.3 The Maastricht Crisis of 1992-93

In 1992, during the ratification process of the Maastricht Treaty, 50.7 per cent of people in Denmark voted against the implementation of the decisions taken by the European Council in Maastricht. The Danes appeared to be concerned about the far-reaching transfer of power outlined in the Treaty, particularly with regard to the so-called "third stage of the European Monetary Union" and the introduction of the EURO currency. Since the Treaty had to be ratified by all member states before it could come into force, the European Council had to find a solution that would enable Denmark to reach to a positive result on the Maastricht Treaty while at the same time accounting for the concerns of the public. The European Heads

of State eventually came up with a compromise that provided Danes with an "opt-out" for the EURO, making it possible for Denmark to remain in the European Union while not joining the common currency and keeping the Danish krone. The compromise paid off as in a second referendum, held one year later in 1993, when the Danes accepted the Maastricht Treaty with 56.8 per cent of the votes.[16]

The problems in the ratification process (e.g. France only approved the Treaty by a tiny margin) resulted in a fundamental re-evaluation of the existing information and communication policy[17] and sparked an interest in enhancing joined communication efforts, such as the interinstitutional declaration on democracy, transparency and subsidiarity in 1993. The Maasticht vote was a deeply felt shock – it was the first time in the history of the Union that a crisis was triggered not by political disagreement between elite actors but by a matter of public opinion (cf. Gramberger 1997: 275, also Tumber 1995: 511). With hindsight the situation of after the Maastricht vote and the "no" votes in France and the Netherlands appears to be very similar.

1.4 The European Union in Crisis?

It is necessary to point out that a political crisis triggered by a referendum is not to be confused with a crisis of the political system *as such*. As observers have pointed out, after the initial sense of disorientation that followed the failed 2005 referenda, the European Union continued to operate normally throughout the rest of the year. In fact, 2005 was a remarkably productive year for the European Union in terms of mastering some difficult decisions in a number of policy domains (cf. Sedelmeier/Young 2006: 3). The same could be said after the

[16] Cf. Protocol on certain provisions relating to Denmark, annexed to the Treaty establishing the European Community (1992).

[17] The term "information and communication policy" hereby refers to the EU's public relations activities and not to the area of media regulation.

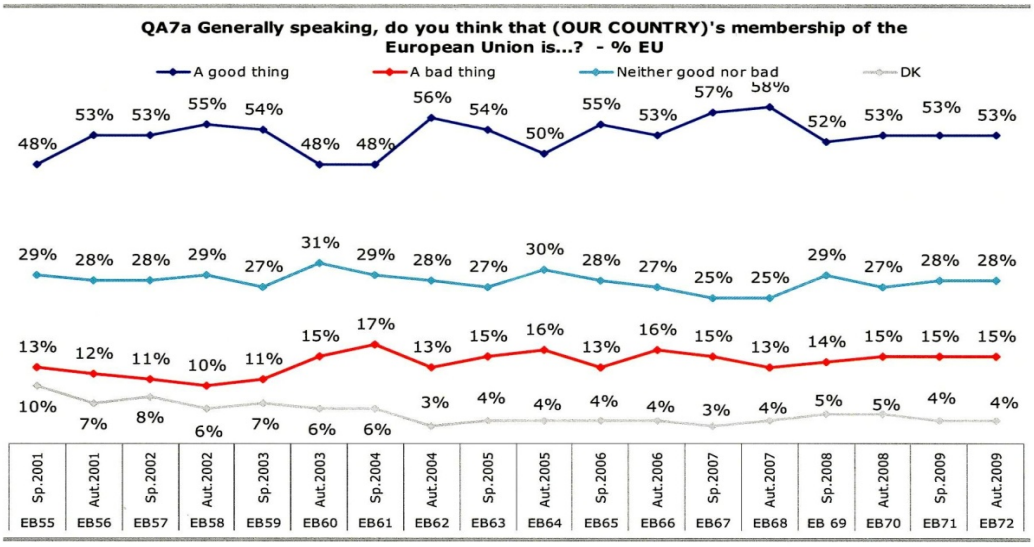
Maastricht crisis, after which the EU went on to successfully launch one of its greatest projects, the common monetary union. The fact that the EU, despite some upheavals in the past, has been able to continue business on a normal basis, might be, after all, less a sign of a system in crisis than a sign of a mature system. In this context, the 2005 referendum results "look like politics as usual (…) They are much like the representative democratic politics that underpin the member states of the EU; iterative processes that involve messy compromises, coalition-building and, frequently, defeats and setbacks" (Taggart 2006: 17). Summarising the events of 2005, it is be justifiable to say that the prevailing feeling of an organisation in "deep crisis" might have to be re-evaluated against the backdrop of the day-to-day normality of the political process. Since its origin, the EU had to cope with several crises – and, in dealing with them, in most cases emerged even stronger than before (cf. Kirt 2001). There were also positive spillover effects with regard to the heightened awareness of EU politics in times of crisis, Jacques Santer himself reflected on the circumstances of his Commission's resignation that

> "Pour l'Europe, elle [la crise] doit être saisie comme une chance. Cette chance, c'est d'abord le fait que l'opinion publique s'intéresse davantage à ce que font les dirigeants politiques. Cela veut dire qu'il nous faudra davantage de démocratie et il nous faudra advantage render des comptes – et je ne parle pas seulement de la Commission." (Santer, quoted in Schmitz 2007: 178)

Indeed, Jacques Santer's departure in 1999 was followed by the implementation of new rules that allowed the Commission President to have more discretionary power vis-à-vis his team of Commissioners (cf. Wessels 2008: 246). In this context, Weidenfeld and Wessels (2006: 25) go as far as to suggest a "dialectic of crisis and reform", labelling a process where a neglect of reforms leads to a crises which invariably promotes the implementation of such reforms.

Yet, it is the member states' increasing use of referenda on EU treaties that may present one of the main communicative challenges to the European institutions. Public votes are being held concerning such issues as membership, joining the EURO zone or the ratification of Treaties. As Taggart (cf. 2006: 10-13) observes, these referenda are being held on a sporadic basis, but they constitute key moments of European integration when they do so. Paradoxically though, many member states are quickly ready to use referenda in a European context while having significant concerns about using them in their domestic politics. This practice can be problematic when member states which usually adhere to a representative model of democracy suddenly resort to direct, plebiscitary models whenever fundamental decisions about Europe are to be taken. In these countries, referenda mean in fact a departure from the normal practice of decision-making and the application of very different democratic logics. It is important to bear in mind that despite the negative outcome of some referenda, public opinion on an aggregate level has not changed its level of support for membership in the European Union as shown in figure II.1.

Figure II.1: Support for EU-Membership



Source: European Commission 2009

This sort of "diffuse support" which had traditionally formed the basis of the "permissive consensus" (also cf. chapter III.2) apparently has its shortcomings against the backdrop of the increasing application of referenda in member states.[18] Rather than justifying EU policies by way of an *ex-post* communication of their positive outputs, EU institutions and member states are nowadays increasingly under pressure to maintain high approval rates throughout a legislative period. Given that a single negative referendum can derail a reform process that has evolved over years, a strategy of "constant campaigning" and proactive communication seems vital. Since Maastricht, the European Union has adopted a number of policies to improve communication towards this objective.

2. The Response: A brief History of European Communication Policy

2.1. Division over Post-Maastricht Communication Strategies

Clearly having foreseen the difficulties in the ratification process, the Maastricht Treaty itself, in an annexe, contains the idea that Europe would have to actively promote its politics and institutions if it wants to maintain its citizens' confidence in the institutions (cf. Tumber 1995: 512, European Commission 1993a: 2). In order to meet this demand, the EU saw itself confronted with two different – and at times even contradicting – communication formulas: *information* and *persuasion*. The first approach, represented by the then European Commissioner

[18] Former Head of Cabinet and European Commissioner Pascal Lamy has described the logic of the permissive consensus by saying that "the people weren't ready to agree to integration, so you had to get on without telling them too much about what was happening" (Lamy, cited in Ross 1995: 94). What on first sight seems like a display of arrogance towards the public, could also serve, with regard to the realisation of such grand projects as the introduction of the common currency, as a telling reflection on the realities of output-oriented policy-making.

for internal political relations, João de Deus Pinhero, wanted to achieve a better acceptance of the EU via improved information of the citizen. Being better informed, thus the logic, citizens would be encouraged to engage in a dialogue. A different approach to communication was the topic of a report, written by an expert committee chaired by a Member of the European Parliament, the Belgian Liberal-Democrat Willy DeClercq. The report "Reflection on Information and Communication policy of the European Community" (DeClercq 1993) went back to an initiative of the European Commission that had asked the committee to come up with proposals for a communication and information strategy in the light of the communicative challenges that would be triggered by the considerable institutional changes set up by Maastricht. The DeClercq report clearly favoured a "marketing approach", i.e. suggested that the European institutions and the member states would have to undertake a better "selling" of the "EU product" - quite similar to selling a commercial commodity. The aim should be to persuade citizens that the EU actually does good things for them by highlighting "the achievements, the benefits, the opportunities in a positive, optimistic way, and not delight in criticism and failure. As far as possible, 'Europe' should be integrated into the information, entertainment, advertising and didactic functions of media, not isolated in special sections" (DeClercq 1993: 12).

The report was given an extremely critical reception by members of the Commission, most notably Commissioner Deus Pinhero and representatives of the media, who basically perceived it as a recipe for manipulative propaganda (cf. Gramberger 1997: 227). As large parts of the expert committee consisted of advertising professionals, the language of the report was layered with business-oriented marketing terms that apparently clashed with the worldview of most EU decision-makers, who were strongly in favour of an "active citizenship concept" as opposed to the implicit "consumer concept" (cf. Tumber 1995: 517). The notion of the informed European citizen who engages in a critical debate with the European institutions was also the guiding idea behind a second report, drawn up

by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture, Youth, Education and the Media. The so-called Oostlander report, named after the committee *rapporteur*, the Dutch Christian-Democrat Arie Oostlander, reflected – in contrast to the DeClercq report – an information oriented approach:

> "An information policy should not be directed solely at achieving a positive response from individuals and their organisations. It can also encourage them to engage in a critical dialogue. The information policy is therefore much more important than 'selling policy', because as far as the Community is concerned its people are both citizens and the object of policy." (Oostlander 1993:13)

These conclusions were more in line with Commissioner Pinheiro's concept of communication and he subsequently introduced a guideline for a "new approach" to communication and information, based on transparency and bringing Europe closer to the citizen (cf. European Commission 1993b). Despite the focus on information instead of marketing, Pinheiro however went on to argue the case for the introduction of an audiovisual culture and the use of new communication techniques in an internal document:

> "[L]a Commission doit pouvoir prendre des initiatives immédiates pour expliquer, réagir, proposer et illustrer. A cette fin, elle devra avoir une connaissance suivie des attentes des différents publics-cibles et disposer d'une panoplie de moyens techniquement performants." (European Commission 1994)

Clearly, the need to be "proactive" and the capacity for "rapid rebuttal" did not go unnoticed by the Commissioner, already indicating an increasing awareness about the need to professionalise political communication in the EU.

Summing up, the debate on Maastricht presented a turning point with regard to the EU's communication and information policy (cf. Gramberger 1997: 216f). It was a first sign that the idea of the "permissive consensus", the

assumption that elite policy makers push forward integration while automatically taking for granted the support or at least acquiescence of the public, reached its limit (cf. Taggart 2006: 12). For the first time, the EU became aware of the significance of communication targeted at the general public instead of merely a circle of elite decision-makers. In the wake of Maastricht, the European institutions came up with communication concepts which can be broadly differentiated into a political marketing approach ("voter as consumer") and a liberal "public sphere" approach ("voter as informed citizen"). As the concept of European citizenship strongly featured in the Maastricht Treaty itself, the communicative approach based on public information inevitably became the favoured one. Yet, in practise, the border between "neutral" public information activities and proactive "advertising" easily becomes blurred. Can a campaign, e.g. on the benefits of European film funding, be informative without being in any sense positively biased towards the organisation that funds it? In this context, it is remarkable to note that the Oostlander and the DeClercq report, despite their different ideological outlooks, both agreed on essential steps towards achieving that goal, e.g. more audiovisual communication instead of leaflet distribution, the employment of professional public relations staff, higher budget for communication and increased efficiency.

The overall question, however, is whether the concept of "bringing Europe closer to the citizen" via enhanced information efforts and dialogue has delivered and introduced greater trust in the EU institutions and their officials or whether the "gap" between the European institutions and the citizens has grown even wider in the meantime, as the 2005 constitutional crisis seems to indicate. The transparency and access to official documents has doubtlessly improved since Maastricht – including Council decisions and public accountability of these decisions. A lasting effect on citizens' level of information is however questionable.

2.2 Action Plan to improve Communicating Europe

After the rejected referenda in France and the Netherlands, widely perceived as a result of inadequate communication, the European Commission responded with a number of initiatives. July 2005 saw the "Action Plan for Communicating Europe" as a first step of a new EU communication policy designed to adopt concrete measures within the Commission to improve communication with its citizens. The action plan acknowledged communication as a "strategic objective" and "a policy in its own right" and as "an essential part of the political process" (cf. European Commission 2005: 2). The initiative promoted a new approach to communication by refocusing its emphasis away from "information" and more towards "listening" in order to better understand and account for citizens' wishes. Outputs should be communicated "in a manner that people can understand and relate to" (cf. European Commission 2005b: 3) mainly by adopting a "going local" strategy that involves the strong participation of the national representations (cf. European Commission 2005: 4). To that end, additional financial and human resources were regarded as instrumental in this process.

On a practical level, the action plan suggested a closer involvement of Commissioners as the public faces of the Commission in the process of communicating Europe. Furthermore, the Commission should communicate "better on fewer subjects", slogans and symbols should be "simple and repetitive" (cf. European Commission 2005b: 5f). Key policy proposals should be supplemented with a special "layperson's summary" explaining the personal and societal benefits of a policy. It was acknowledged that the so-called "Eurospeak" of many current proposals comes across as "confusing, complicated and often elitist" (cf. European Commission 2005b: 7). In order to evaluate the effectiveness, cost-efficiency and relevance of measures undertaken the need for an assessment of the communication impact was stressed (cf. European Commission 2005b: 8). The Commission spokesperson service became recognised in the document as a "key component", not only communicating

directly with the media, but also ensuring permanent contact with the communication units of the several Directorate Generals (DGs). Most notably, the spokesperson service was asked to publish a "story-led news agenda" in order to increase the interest of the audiovisual media (cf. European Commission 2005b: 9). The EU website www.europa.eu was to be restructured in such a way as to convey information 1) to the general public locally via the representations in the member states and 2) specialist information through the respective DG responsible for the topic.

Based on the experiences of the past, the action plan can be said to reflect the shortcomings of the communication process very accurately: the Commission acknowledged – also on the basis of former initiatives (European Commission 2001, European Commission 2002, European Commission 2004) – that "current campaigns focus on the political elite and media and fail to portray the benefits and consequences for day-to-day life in a direct and understandable manner" (cf. European Commission 2005b: 3). The action plan further mentioned that "Politicians and institutional stakeholders at all levels have to gain Europeans' trust through good policies and good communication about those policies" (cf. European Commission 2005b: 2).

One of the key aspects of the paper was an emphasis of professionalisation of existing services with the aim of supplementing pure information tasks with dialogue-oriented measures, i.e. being responsive to the wishes of the European citizen. Yet one critical question remained: how can European citizens engage in a meaningful form of dialogue when they have almost no knowledge and understanding of the functioning of the Union, its institutions and their role? The action plan partly addresses this problem by suggesting the publication of the above mentioned "layperson's summary" of key policy proposals in order to facilitate understanding and communicate benefits to the public. While this measure might be a reasonable instrument to better inform already interested parties, the complexity of the politics dimension is likely to remain high and

prevent large parts of the general public from attaining understanding of EU politics that would be adequate for an at least basic form of exchange. In this context it is not made clear how citizens' input – the form and quality of which may be extremely varied – could be accounted for in the highly differentiated policy drafting activities of the Commission.

As far as the emphasis on "responsiveness" and "dialogue" is concerned, the European Union system is marked by a strong intermediary system that in a multi-step process of opinion formation and policy articulation "filters" the opinions of interested citizens and, on an aggregate level, "translates" them into a form compatible to the European legislative process. DGs have over the years established stable working relationships with associations and public interest groups. As to whether these networks can be supplemented with additional feedback lines from largely uninformed citizens remains questionable even to the more idealistic proponents of participatory government systems.

2.3 Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate

In October 2005, the Commission launched its "Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate". Following-up on the "Action Plan for Communicating Europe" and its list of concrete measures, Plan-D set out to explore ways of stimulating a wider debate between the EU and its citizens with a more long-term view on the objective of reinvigorating European democracy (cf. European Commission 2005c: 3f). A particular emphasis was placed on the "feedback process", i.e. collecting and taking stock of the outcomes of the various national debates on the future of Europe: "Ultimately, Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate is a listening exercise so that the European Union can act on the concerns expressed by its citizens" (European Commission 2005c: 4).

In the document, the Commission also placed an emphasis on strengthening its ties with the European Parliament and, in particular, with the

national parliaments as "National Parliaments are the bridge to ensuring effective scrutiny of decisions taken by national Governments on European issues" and "a greater voice for Parliaments is a greater voice for Europe's citizens" (European Commission 2005c: 4). The greater involvement of national parliaments can be regarded as a first concrete step towards tackling the "blame game", i.e. the tendency of national politicians to use the EU as a scapegoat for unpopular decisions while taking credit for the benefits originating from EU policies (cf. chapter IV.1.2).

Plan-D sought to stimulate a debate about the added value and the concrete benefits that the EU provides for its citizens, i.e. "informing people about Europe's role through concrete achievements and projects" (cf. European Commission 2005c: 5). This would, for instance, include the capacity of Europe to retain a certain level of social welfare, and the tangible benefits EU policies bring to the daily lives of its citizens, as well as highlighting the role of Europe in the world.

On a practical level, participation in the debates should be boosted by several initiatives, such as visits of Commissioners to member states or the creation of a network of "European Goodwill Ambassadors" and a "European Round Table". In addition the Commission wanted to improve its communication with stakeholders and promote greater openness of the institutions to the general public. Plan-D also named a list of concrete tools designed to support the debate on European policies, such as a the introduction of targeted focus groups as a first step in open policy making (cf. European Commission 2005c: 10).

The main emphasis of Plan-D, however, remained on the consultation process. It forms a vital part of the so-called "period of reflection" following the referenda in France and The Netherlands. In order to respond to the obvious gap in perception, the Commission proposed to gather the opinions and views of citizens in member states with the objective of building a new political consensus on the most vital questions facing Europe. The debates should take place on a

national level with the Commission assisting and contributing where necessary in the local organisation of events. At the end of this process, the presidency of the Council should be presented with a summary of the outcome of these debates, thereby supporting the presidency's efforts to reach a new constitutional agreement. In sum, "Plan-D must seek to clarify, deepen and legitimise a new consensus on Europe and address criticisms and find solutions where expectations have not been met" (European Commission 2005c: 11).

2.4 White Paper on Communication Policy

February 2006 saw the publication of the long-awaited "White Paper on Communication Policy" by the European Commission. The prime role of communication was recognised by labelling communication policy as a policy in its own right. The paper stated that "[C]ommunication is essential to a healthy democracy … Democracy can flourish only if citizens know what is going on, and are able to participate fully" (European Commission 2006b: 2). A special reference was made in the introduction to the role the EU plays in the process of globalisation. During the heated debate on the service directive it became apparent that the topic of social welfare and security was of special importance to a majority of European citizens. In this area the EU was – in its opinion wrongly – perceived as promoting the lowering of social standards. As one of the lessons learned from the referenda, communicating the EU's role in mediating the effects of globalisation in a beneficial way for its member states became a priority.

The Commission advocates, following up earlier proposals in the Action Plan and Plan-D, a "fundamentally new approach – a decisive move away from one-way communication to reinforced dialogue, from an institution-centred to a citizen-centred communication, from a Brussels-based to a more decentralised approach." (European Commission 2006b: 4). The essence of this approach was a focus on dialogue and debate and a "two-way communication" process, as already

implied in Plan-D. The White Paper, however, made an explicit reference to the creation of a "European Public Sphere". It was acknowledged that European issues, as far as they appear on the agenda at all, are still seen by European citizens from a national perspective and that the lack of the existence of real pan-European media has been an important reason for that. Despite the significant importance of European decisions for the life of citizens, the policy process remains remote: "There is a sense of alienation from 'Brussels', which in part mirrors the disenchantment with politics in general" (European Commission 2006b: 4). In order to change this "Europe also needs to find its place in the existing national, regional and local 'public spheres'" (European Commission 2006b: 5). While the exact nature of this European Public Sphere(s) remained unclear and was not outlined further, a stronger recognition of the European dimension in national political exchange was seen as an important aspect in this respect.

To tackle these problems, the Commission suggested an "agenda for action" based on five areas:

- Defining common principles with regard to the right of information and freedom of expression, inclusiveness, diversity and participation (cf. European Commission 2006b: 6).
- Empowering citizens by improving civic education, connecting citizens with each other and connecting the citizens and public institutions (cf. European Commission 2006b: 7).
- Working with the media and new technologies and by focussing on "Giving Europe a face", the national, regional and local dimension, and exploiting the potential of new technologies (cf. European Commission 2006b: 10).

- Understanding European Public Opinion by improving existing tools such as the Eurobarometer survey and also introducing new qualitative studies on European public opinion. A "network of national experts" was suggested for the better exchange of information as well as the setting-up of an "Observatory for European Public Opinion" in order to provide in-depth analyses of trends (cf. European Commission 2006b: 12).
- Doing the job together working on the construction of a European public sphere by cooperating on all levels: member state level, European institutions and the regional and national levels. Political parties and civil society organisations played a special role in this process (cf. European Commission 2006b: 13).

To help achieve these objectives, the White Paper – similar to the Action Plan and Plan-D – focused on improving the joined communication efforts of the institutions, the strategy of "going local" and a professionalisation of communication services in terms of "customer orientation". The White Paper on Communication Policy was already the third major initiative of the Commission within a period of two years. As with the initiatives that followed the Maastricht vote, the European Parliament stated its own position on the communicative measures that should be undertaken and which were not in all points congruent with the Commission proposals outlined above.

2.5 The "Herrero"-Report

In the autumn of 2006, the European Parliament's committee on Culture and Education released a report, named after the responsible rapporteur, the Spanish Christian-Democrat Luis Herrero, reflecting the views of the European Parliament on the Commission proposals.

While confirming some major points made by the Commission, notably with regard to "clear evidence of under-information of citizens on European issues, as reflected in the results of various Eurobarometer polls" (European Parliament 2006: 1) the report highlighted the importance of education on European affairs and the fact that "having a certain level of understanding about Europe is a prerequisite for successful interactive communication with the EU" (European Parliament 2006: 2). The Parliament welcomed the measures proposed in the "Action Plan", but was critical on some apparently over-idealistic suggestions made in the White Paper: as far as national debates on Europe are concerned, parliamentarians doubted that the added-value of European integration becomes apparent on the level of citizens as a result of "blame game" and "credit taking" tactics by national politicians still acting as a communication barrier (cf. European Parliament 2006: 2). The report went on to see a lack of "practical expression" about how the Commission, in a two-way process, wants to take into account citizen's views. Furthermore, "the idea that the citizens become drivers of participation and dialogue does not seem reasonable, since it is not citizens who should seek out information, but rather information that should seek out the citizens" (European Parliament 2006: 2). As far as the information policy via info centres was concerned (cf. chapter III.3), the reports regarded it as necessary to rethink the present concept of these information offices, "since their public relations activities do not appeal to citizens and the resources earmarked for them could be used far more efficiently" (European Parliament 2006: 2).

In the explanatory statement, the report's concern about the citizen's lack of knowledge is highlighted in even more drastic words "it would be pointless to listen carefully to what citizens had to say if they were ill-informed (…) information must come first, otherwise no opinion is possible. Or at any rate, no useful option" (European Parliament 2006: 4). The European Commission in its White Paper tends to overemphasise the concept of dialogue, while underestimating "the impact that the mass media have on society" (European

Parliament 2006: 7). The Parliament was also critical about the creation of an "Observatory for European Public Opinion" and believes it would be better to make more coordinated use of already existing sources (European Parliament 2006: 4). Finally the report states that "[W]e need to succeed in explaining what Europe can do for each and every citizen" (European Parliament 2006: 5).

The points of critique mentioned in the Herrero Report present a remarkably precise account of the shortcomings of previous Commission proposals in terms of the practical implementation of rather abstract concepts such as the establishment of a "European Public Sphere", "dialogue with the citizen" and the "going local" strategy. With more than a hint of scepticism, the report appears to confirm a certain detachedness of Commission proposals as far as assumptions are concerned that relate to citizens intrinsic motivation to participate or their media use.

2.6 Communicating Europe in Partnership

One and a half years after the publication of the White Paper on Communication, and with a view to the role played by the European Parliament and other European institutions, the Commission presented the results of the consultation process in a follow-up document "Communicating Europe in Partnership". The paper is s a collection of the input of hundreds of submitted comments on the White Paper and the outcome of several conferences organised around the topic of improving communication. In line with the goals of these earlier proposals, the central objective of this initiative is to empower citizens to be better informed and to enable them to voice their opinions on European matters.

The introductory paragraph outlined a shift in the purpose of the Union from being mainly concerned with construction of the common market and peaceful cooperation between former enemies 50 years ago to the new challenges globalisation poses nowadays, economically but also with regard to such issues as

energy supply, migration, climate change: "there is an underlying conviction amongst European citizens that our societies can only tackle today's challenges by working on a European scale" (European Commission 2007: 4).

A new communication policy should enable citizens to have "a better understanding of the impact of EU policies at European, national and local level. Such a policy will address fundamental concerns of citizens, for whom the information on the EU seems disorganised, dispersed and difficult to understand" (European Commission 2007: 4f). Moreover, it was recognised that "citizen's knowledge of the EU, its institutions and policies is rather limited" (European Commission 2007: 5). The Commission proposes to respond to this shortcomings by improving education on the EU in the member states and also on the level of political parties "which have the responsibility of transmitting conflicting views in order to animate and structure the public debate on EU issues" (European Commission 2007: 5).

The Commission itself should reinforce its communication activities by providing information and engaging in debate and discussion and, in doing so, "promoting active European citizenship and contributing to the development of a European Public Sphere" (European Commission 2007: 5). To that end "Communicating Europe in Partnership" lists a few concrete initiatives and proposals, notably:

- the "Inter-Institutional Agreement" (IAA) as a central component which seeks to include all the important actors comprising the EU institutions, member states and interested stakeholders in order to agree on selected communication priorities which would be outlined in a common annual work plan. These measures go beyond the existing "Inter-institutional Group on Information" (IGI), the policy structure for agreeing EU communication strategy and selecting common communication priorities for the EU institutions and member states.

- "Management Partnerships" cooperation between the Commission and individual member states and coordinated communication plans in order to promote specific issues and policies in a member state.
- "Pilot Information Networks" (PINs) with the aim of improving the information flow between the EU and national parliaments (European Commission 2007: 11). A better communication structure could greatly enhance the chances of transnational debates and would also make it much more difficult for national governments to play the "blame game".
- The creation of "European Public Spaces" as meeting places for debates, cultural events and lectures.

Moreover, measures undertaken focus on the development and improvement of existing services and tools such as the network of Europe Direct Information Relays, *Europe by Satellite*, Eurobarometer and the www.europa.eu website. As a tangible goal for the future, these measures were aimed at "the overall objective of supporting the ratification process for the Reform Treaty and increasing participation in the 2009 European Parliament elections" (European Commission 2007: 17).

3. Conclusion: A Review of European Communication Policy

Concluding and coming back to the question of the constitutional crisis, it is striking how the challenge of "communicating Europe to the people" has remained an unsolved problem over the years. Despite the enhanced efforts after Maastricht to "bring Europe closer to the citizen", it is obvious that the EU must be seen to have failed in this process: the problems encountered in the ratification process of the Constitution, the steady drop in participation in European

elections[19] or the persistently low level of knowledge about Europe and its institutions among the general public speak a clear language. The important conclusion that can be drawn by looking at earlier crisis scenarios is that the EU predominantly suffers (and has suffered) from a crisis of public communication. Trenz (2008: 50f) has spoken about "the illusion of public communication management" with regard to the EU's efforts to "public sphere building" from above as outlined e.g. in the White Paper on Communication Policy. Comments on the White Paper that were made during the consultation phase via the information service *EurActiv* complement this view.[20] When taking the outspoken aim of the latest initiative "Communicating Europe in Partnership" as a yardstick then there is no help in denying that neither the ratification of the Reform Treaty went smoothly, nor did any measure manage to boost participation in the European elections. The critique in the Herrero-Report does not seem completely unfounded: where lack of motivation, interest and knowledge effectively prevent a meaningful dialogue between citizens and the institutions – mere attempts to provide forums for such a dialogue are apparently forlorn endeavours. And, of even greater negative significance, where such *meaningfulness* is missing, forums of debate, be it on the internet or in the form of "citizen conferences" in Brussels, run the serious danger of being cynically regarded as public showcases that display an alleged "connectivity" that is far from reality. Critically, and maybe provocatively, one would have to observe that a significant number of the measures proposed for "bridging the gap" are just another reflection of the persistence of the gap itself and ideas born out of the insider culture of the so-

[19] Since the first European elections, voter turn-out has continuously declined from an almost 62 per cent in 1979 to a mere 42 per cent in 2009.

[20] Comments by stakeholders were collected in EurActiv's own "Yellow Paper on Communication" (www.euractiv.com) and contain demands to "choose realistic audiences", "increase communication resources" and "decentralise".

called "Brussels bubble": the belief in citizens' eagerness to participate in internet forums where they would cheerfully debate "European issues" in their spare time, indicates a certain remoteness of such measures from the day-to-day reality of the European citizen.

With hindsight, it also has to be queried, whether some of the "commercial" concepts highlighted in the 1993 DeClercq report were perhaps prematurely dismissed at a time when the concept of political marketing was rather one-sidedly interpreted as "manipulation". Nowadays, in the wake of modern marketing techniques having become popular in European national election contests many of these suggestions could be seen as congruent with a contemporary form of proactive political communication and being practised by several national governments.[21] It appears that a basic assessment of the interplay between communication and legitimacy as it plays out in the multilevel reality of the EU is needed in order to evaluate the prospects of reducing the "communication deficit".

[21] The 1997 New Labour election campaign is generally being seen as having introduced many of those techniques in Europe, i.e. focus group surveys, computer database for rapid rebuttal or "spin doctoring" (cf. Spanier 2004).

III Communication and Democratic Legitimacy

Among the reasons most often quoted for the failure of the constitutional referenda in France and The Netherlands was a perceived lack of democratic legitimacy. The notion of the European "democratic deficit" is indeed a profound issue that has lingered with the European Union for decades and has been a frequent subject of debate since the Maastricht crisis of 1992-1993. The debate surrounding a "democratic deficit" of the EU is not only of particular importance when debating the legitimacy and level of acceptance of an organisation, but also lies at the core of the debate on the "European Public Sphere" and the question of how to communicate Europe to its citizens. Some scholars argue that the European Union's "communication deficit" is a direct result of the Union's "democracy deficit" and unless this democratic deficit is overcome, the task of communicating Europe to the general public is bound to be a fruitless undertaking (e.g. Gerhards 1993b: 108). Throughout the 1990's, the assumption that Europe suffered from a democratic deficit retained much currency among a majority of academic researchers (cf. Meyer 1999: 618). In recent years however, and in response to the Treaties of Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon in particular having introduced additional participatory rights, the democratic deficit notion has increasingly become contested.[22]

Without any doubt, the debate on the EU's democratic legitimacy touches upon the very core of our understanding of how citizens should, or indeed are, able to participate actively in society. The issue of democratic participation bears most significant implications for the role of a "public sphere" in democracy and subsequently the role of the media in this process. In order to evaluate the

[22] The Treaty of Lisbon provides not only for a strengthening of powers for the European Parliament, but also for a greater influence of national parliaments and the possibility of a "European Citizens' Initiative" where people can through the collection of 1 million signatures request the Commission to propose legislation on a certain issue.

democratic merits of the European Union, it is first of all important to clarify the concept and understanding of democracy of multilevel systems in a first step. The following paragraphs will therefore aim to reflect the state of debate in contemporary democratic theory and, on this basis, take a closer look at the different dimensions of democracy in general and the democratic accountability of a supranational organisation such as the EU in particular.

The second part of the chapter will then deal with the specific role communication takes in this process, notably with regard to the concepts of a "European Public Sphere" and its normative and functional implications for the democratic legitimacy of a political system such as the EU. At the end of the chapter, the notion of the "communication deficit" is specified in the light of open questions and the theoretical assumptions made about the interplay between democratic legitimacy and communication.

1. The "Democratic Deficit"

In examining the literature regarding the democratic accountability of political systems, it is noticeable that communication scholars and political scientists tend to differ in their analytical approach. Whereas the first group tends to focus their view on the "input" side of the democratic process, i.e. participatory elements, public deliberation and the strong role of the media in this process (and thereby particularly concentrate on the link between legitimacy and public discourse), the latter tend to evaluate political systems also on the basis of their systemic "output" and a range of contributing factors. As democratic theory forms one of the main pillars in the history of thought within political science, the literature on the topic is naturally very broad and diverse. In the following the analysis will concentrate on the classic comparative models of authors such as Robert Dahl and Arend Lijphard as their influential concepts are widely regarded as having shaped our contemporary understanding of democracy and also reflect a broad consensus in

contemporary political theory. The specific debate on the democratic "fitness" of multilevel systems such as the European Union has been greatly influenced by the works of Scharpf, Moravcsik, Majone and Cheneval whose arguments will be subsequently laid out in the analysis, thereby taking account of prominent critics such as Follesdal and Hix.

1.1 International Organisations and the Question of a Democratic Deficit

In his research of international political systems, Robert Dahl has developed a comprehensive set of indicators enabling him to compare different countries and their relative state of democratisation. He found that when comparing real-world political systems they generally fall short of the "ideal" picture of democracy and, indeed, the term "democracy" itself.[23] In Dahl's view, even modern countries such as the United States, Great Britain or Germany lack a sufficiently high degree of citizen participation and public control to be regarded as democracies in the strict sense of the word. Instead, Dahl labels these countries, along with a number of other modern representative democracies, "polyarchies", meaning "rule by many". The central features of polyarchic democracies – distinguishing them from oligarchic and hegemonic types – are high levels of "participation" and "contestation". Participation refers to the involvement of a majority of citizens in the electoral process and public debate; contestation refers to the pluralistic expression of interest and a competitive decision-making process[24] (cf. Dahl 1998). Dahl's conception sets high standards for democracy, placing a heavy

[23] Measured against the five parameters "effective participation", "voting equality", "enlightened understanding", "control of the agenda" and "inclusion of adults", according to Dahl, no existing country currently fulfils the standards of democracy that would be required, in the sense that the term "democracy" literally means "rule by the people" (cf. Dahl 1998).

[24] In total, Dahl distinguishes seven main characteristics of a polyarchy (cf. Dahl 1998: 86f). Participation and contestation however constitute the main poles on this spectrum.

emphasis on "government of the people" as well as "government by the people" (cf. Schmidt 2000: 395). Many allegations about the EU's democratic deficit are made on the grounds of very limited participation of citizens. In their current form, thus the argument, the EU institutions are not directly accountable to the public because the principal decision-making body, the Council of Ministers, is not directly elected by (and therefore not directly accountable to) a European *demos*.[25] This view corresponds with Dahl's interpretation that international organisations lack democratic legitimacy simply by nature of their specific structural conditions; they are so to speak "inherently undemocratic". They are so mainly because of their large scale and distance from the electorate. From a theoretical point of view they should therefore be treated as "international bargaining systems" rather than democratic systems. It should however be noted that Dahl nevertheless arrives at the conclusion that membership in international organisations is a desirable thing. Despite the costs such a bureaucratic bargaining system imposes on democracy, membership in this organisation offers an overall positive effect for a national state (cf. Dahl 1999: 34).

Dahl's concept of international organisations such as the EU being undemocratic *a priori* might be considered exaggerated in view of the fact that the EU has come a long way in terms of having subsequently introduced direct and indirect democratic elements (cf. Schmidt 2000: 431).[26] Yet, Dahl's line of argumentation hints at a "structural democratic deficit" of the EU. There is an "incongruity problem": the gap between those who govern and those who are governed and the fact that there seems to be no proper democratic link between those two spheres. The gap thus reflects the EU's shortcomings with regard to the two basic elements of the polyarchy concept, participation and contestation.

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[25] Ministers and Heads of State are only accountable to their national people, yet they take decisions in Brussels that affect *all* Europeans.

[26] Eichener (1998) and Zweifel (2002) claim that the modes of participation offered by the European Union would justify its inclusion in Dahl's conception of polyarchies.

Participation of European citizens is comparatively low as the EU executive is not directly elected, but the result of a complex and intricate negotiation process between member states. Despite of a significant evolution of its powers, the European Parliament's means to control the executive still lag behind the system of checks and balances exerted by many national parliaments. Contestation, i.e. the articulation of opinions and views that compete in a pluralistic arena, is hampered by a lack of intermediary systems of interest representation, i.e. a European media system and a "European Public Sphere". True contestation, according to this view, requires the existence of a European *demos*. The idea of the European *demos* is thereby not limited to the concept of a common electoral pool that participates in national and European elections and thus indirectly and directly decides on its representation on the European level, but as a body sharing a collective European identity. A common identity, it is argued (e.g. Kielmansegg 1996: 54ff, Gerhards 1993: 98, Scharpf 1999: 8), forms an indispensable prerequisite for a truly European discourse. However, a common "European feeling" does not seem to be apparent within the general public, an informed and knowledgeable European discourse is currently limited to a small circle of multilingual elite actors with a direct involvement in the European political process (cf. Schmidt 2001: 431-434, also chapter IV.1.4).

1.2 Re-focus on Multilevel Democracy Concepts

The question of a common European identity, that may or may not evolve in the future, set apart – the European Union is a real and existing political system. Its democratic legitimacy should therefore be judged on the grounds of its current institutional structure. Dahl, by his own admission, is very radical in the application of his polyarchy concept to international organisations, a concept that was predominantly developed to compare national political systems. There are obvious theoretical predicaments when applying nation state frameworks to

multilevel systems as an evaluation of democratic legitimacy is not least a "question of standards" (cf. Neidhardt 2006: 49). The democratic deficit is, from this perspective, often a foregone conclusion, or as Moravcsik remarks "most such judgements are so unequivocal that authors devote most of their time to proposals for solutions" (Moravcsik 2004: 336).[27] In order to realistically evaluate the democratic potential of the European Union it is proposed to shift the perspective from a normative, discursive approach, i.e. the debate on how close the European Union comes to an "ideal" of democratic participation, to the question of how the European Union actually compares to national governments in this respect. As multilevel systems differ in many ways from national political systems, they also require a different theoretical framework designed to appropriately describe the specific systemic conditions of such a system, notably with regard to its democratic legitimacy. Majone therefore advocates a re-setting of standards by which to assess the legitimacy of European integration, suggesting that the current norms used are inappropriate for the description of the *sui generis* character of the European Union (cf. Majone 1998: 6). This perspective promotes a pragmatic approach, pointing out the shortcomings of real-life political systems in practice rather than adhering to an "ideal" textbook model. Moravcsik stresses this point when stating:

> "If such an assessment is not to be an exercise in utopian thinking, then international institutions should not be compared to ideal democratic systems. Instead we must ask whether they approximate the 'real world' democracy generally achieved by existing advanced democracies, which face constraints of limited public information and interest, regulatory capture, the credibility of commitments, and bounded consensus. Any democratic merit derived from ideal theory must therefore be 'calibrated' in order to assess whether the current arrangements are the best that are feasible under 'real-world' circumstances." (Moravcsik 2004: 337)

[27] A comparison, as Cheneval puts it, in which "apples" are accused of not being "oranges" (cf. Cheneval 2004).

In the context of the EU's record as a fully functional supranational institution, Scharpf critically notes that "the allegedly fundamental democratic deficit seems to remain a faintly academic concern while the processes of European decision-making continue" (Scharpf 1999: 12). Drawing attention to the European Union's unique setting does by no means attempt to claim that the political system of the EU constitutes the epitome of democratic accountability, but rather serves to clarify popular misunderstandings and acquire a heightened awareness of what it means to conceptualise adequate democratic structures for a multilevel system (cf. Cheneval 2003: 17). Supposed democratic shortcomings of the EU must also be seen against the backdrop of a comparative empirical analysis of modern industrial democracies (cf. Moravcsik 2004: 337) and it is here that many arguments that are brought forward against the democratic deficit of the EU are actually deficits of democratic accountability in the member states themselves, and that the EU system actually compares quite favourably in a number of cases (cf. Cheneval 2004: 1).

Following Arend Lijphart's conceptual design of governments, the EU's constitutional arrangement fits the description of a "consociative system" (cf. Lijphart 1993). This system refers to a form of government that ensures a commonly acceptable division of power in societies consisting of deeply divided segments. Its features are: 1) a division of power with regard to matters of general interest while ensuring the participation of representatives of all important segments; 2) the autonomy of the segments in all other matters; 3) proportional representation and the appointment of administrative civil servants 4) a right to veto with regard to matters that are of vital interest to individual segments. Consociative democracy, according to Lijphart, "challenges the traditional narrow equation of democracy with majority rule" (Lijphart 1993:189). Measured against the above listed criteria, Lijphart places the EU in the range of political systems that follow a consensus oriented model, e.g. Switzerland and Belgium, designed

to meet the needs of a pluralistic and segmented society. The EU, as a consociative system, naturally deviates in some respects from the system of nation states, for instance in that the Council as the second chamber is more powerful than the first chamber, i.e. the European Parliament and that there is also no clear cut distinction between executive and legislative powers. Yet it fulfils most democracy criteria of national systems, leading Lijphart to conclude that "if the EU is regarded as a federal state, its institutions are remarkably close to the consensus model of democracy", this is also the reason why it increasingly makes sense to study the EU as a federal state rather than an international organisation (cf. Lijphart 1999: 34).

Following Lijphart's line of argument, it is precisely because of the highly developed institutional structure and the advanced level of integration that the European Union and its institutions are frequently compared to nation states and their structural settings. However, in doing so, the EU invariably becomes measured against democracy criteria that were originally developed to assess the "democratic fitness" of national political systems. Cheneval, in his work on democratic participation and representation, points to the inadequacy of such a democracy concept for systems based on a multilevel structure. It is by no means a given logic that the democratic structure of the EU should follow that of a nation state or, even if it should it is entirely unclear which model should be adapted.[28] Maximising civic participation by way of introducing direct democratic elements may seem inappropriate for a consociative system, quite similar to claims in Switzerland to elect the Federal Council by direct popular vote. Such a move could threaten to cause an imbalance in the carefully designed federal system of

[28] If one, for instance, takes the example of a democracy that elects its government by way of direct elections, the EU is claimed to suffer from a representative deficit because its citizens have no direct influence on the constitution of the Commission or the Council of Ministers. The European Parliament, along with the national parliaments, however does have a significant influence on the constitution of Commission and Council.

concordance[29] and it would be questionable if such a change in procedure would actually result in a gain or a loss of democratic legitimacy (cf. Cheneval 2003: 19).

Which norm is applied to the democratic fitness of a political system depends on the political reality in which this system operates. One could also change the perspective and argue that the EU is a supranational body and that the adequate level of analysis and comparison is therefore not the national but the international level. It is quite clear that in this context and compared to international organisations such as the UN or the WTO, the democratic legitimacy of the EU is significantly more advanced (cf. Cheneval 2003: 19). For similar reasons, Majone refuses popular arguments made by analogy between national and European levels, notably with regard to the division of powers and role of the European Parliament, whose role is inherently limited in comparison to national parliaments because of the two strands of legitimacy that are characteristic for multilevel systems. The fact that Council and EP depend on proposals by the Commission is not in order to give a privileged position to a supranational bureaucracy against democratically elected representatives, but rather a mechanism to ensure that Council and EP are more closely linked to European law and in order to prevent negative side-effects resulting from majority rule in one of the two bodies (Majone 1998: 7f). Summing-up, the European Union appears too different with regard to its institutional structure, its range of competencies and policies to be judged against the standards of national systems. In a multilevel system, legitimacy appears to be a more complex construct, even

[29] In the Swiss political system, the concordance system refers to the representation of the four major parties in the Federal Council according to a "magic formula", securing the participation of the major political strands as well as linguistic groups.

paradoxical at times, because a gain in democratic representation on one level may result in a loss of democratic accountability on the other level.[30]

1.3 The Majority Dilemma

The body of literature on the question of the democratic legitimacy of the EU shows a reciprocal effect between theory and real-world indicators: the gradual development and integration of the union has been accompanied by increasingly advanced legitimisation theories (cf. Cheneval 2005: 6). In the context of a more complex understanding of democratic accountability, the "classic" majoritarian model of democracy has been subjected to a number of revisions (cf. Schmidt 2008: 277). The work of Fritz Scharpf, in drawing the distinction between input and output legitimacy, has had a particular impact on the debate by supplementing the classic political philosophy notion of democracy with the multifaceted conditions of modern society. Input-oriented arguments for legitimisation predominantly rely on the elements "participation" and "consensus", the emphasis is on "government by the people" whereas output-oriented arguments focus on "government for the people", effective decision-making and the promotion of common welfare (cf. Scharpf 1999: 6).[31]

The input perspective is classically adopted by advocates of public sphere oriented, deliberative democracy models. Legitimacy derived from the participation of many citizens seems particularly plausible when applied to a local setting where all stakeholders in a decision can deliberate by way of an informed dialogue and reach a conclusion to which everybody can agree, ideally a "win-win" solution. However, as Scharpf points out, this plausibility suffers in a

[30] Questions of democratic legitimacy often represent a trade-off between inherent but conflicting elements of democratic government, for instance the dilemma between majority rule and proportional representation (cf. Moravcsik 2002: 614).

[31] On the conflicting poles of system effectiveness and participation cf. Dahl (1994).

proportional relation as the distance between those directly affected by a decision and their representatives increases. The greater the distance the less likely are apparent "win-win" situations or common understanding – in essence Rousseau's concept of the emergence of a *volonté générale* (cf. Rousseau 1986) – on the rationality of which everybody can agree.

The idea of the *volonté générale* implies that decisions are taken by majority and, because the will of the majority carries authority, the decision is usually accepted also by those who would have favoured a different outcome. The majority rule, however, is directly related to issues of common history, language, culture, in short: a common identity (cf. Scharpf 1999: 9, Kaina 2009: 53f). The rule of the majority is only likely to be accepted by the public if there is a belief in the basic "sameness" of the society which in turn fosters trust in the decisions taken by the majority. In the absence of this "thick" collective identity, e.g. in multi-ethnic states, this logic fails to stand, and majority rule achieves a threatening character, particularly for those segments in the society that are ethnically or culturally different from the majority and may suffer from continuous defeats in elections.

This factor makes the issue of majority rule central to the debate surrounding the input legitimacy of political systems and multilevel systems in particular. The European Union invariably faces a majority dilemma on the input side: even if there were institutional changes introduced that would allow for more participatory elements the input legitimacy of decisions taken by majority rule would not greatly increase because these decisions would not be seen as reflecting the "generalisable interests" of the majority of a homogeneous entity, but rather the special interests of a number of member states (Scharpf 1999: 7ff, also Lijphart 1999: 32). Input legitimacy is therefore not only linked to the participation of citizens (via direct or indirect electoral processes) but also presupposes a common identity that makes majority decisions acceptable.

In this context, Scharpf argues that "the confusion and frustration of present debates" about the democratic legitimacy of the European Union can only be overcome if the distinction between the input- and output democratic legitimacy is acknowledged and if it is recognised that the European Union is fundamentally different from national democracies in this respect. The EU is a predominantly output-oriented institution because it depends on institutional norms and incentive mechanisms that must serve two conflicting purposes: to prevent the abuse of public power and to effectively solve problems. European elections, in this context, are less an expression of the will of the people but rather serve as an "infrastructure of political accountability" for the output-oriented institutions (cf. Scharpf 1999: 12ff).

Compared to most national settings, the European Union is generally held to fall short as far as its input legitimacy is concerned (cf. Schmidt 2008: 403). Yet a number of authors argue that the procedure of elections indeed provides European citizens with a legitimate means to express their preferences: as a multilevel system, the EU is in fact based on a double strand of legitimacy, i.e. through European *and* national elections. Although the extent of this input might vary when compared to national political systems, a considerable degree of input legitimacy of the EU has to be conceded (cf. Cheneval 2004, Moravcsik 2002: 612), particularly in the context of the European Parliament's increase in powers – both with regard to the legislative process and to the selection and control of the Commission.[32] There is consensus even among sceptics of the current system, there that a majoritarian model of democracy is not appropriate for the governance of a multiethnic multilevel system such as the European Union. Democracies draw their legitimacy from several components: apart from the principle of majority, there is the principle of adequate representation, the rule of law and the

[32] The introduction of an "early warning mechanism" by the Lisbon Treaty has added an additional element of legislative control to national parliaments and to the input side.

protection of basic rights and minorities. These elements need to be balanced under the specific circumstances and according to the specific demands a political system is exposed to. The very special demands that are posed by a multilevel setting – notably resolving the inherent tension the majority principle places on a heterogeneous community of small and large member states – has led to a specific system of checks and balances in the EU that makes a direct comparison to national systems from a national perspective an inadequate undertaking. Majone sees the tendency to equate democracy with majority rule as quite common but nevertheless "puzzling", since pure majoritarian systems in the Westminster tradition are the exception rather than the rule.[33] Especially federal states apply fundamentally non-majoritarian forms of government as there is a strong correlation between the needs of cleavage management in plural societies and the number and importance of non-majoritarian features in their systems. It is therefore "puzzling" that many critics continue to apply majoritarian standards to non-majoritarian practices (cf. Majone 1998: 10f).

1.4 Alternative Forms of Legitimacy: The Multilevel Perspective

In the absence of a common European demos and a common European identity, a multilevel system such as the European Union is faced with the "challenge" to develop democratic structures that account for the reality of national *demoi* within a transnational framework. Recent years have seen a number of new and innovative perspectives seeking to reconcile the idea of democracy under the conditions of the persistence of multiple *demoi* within concepts labelled "demoicracy" (cf. Nicolaidis 2003), "transnational democracy" (cf. Bohman 2007), "fragmented democracy" (cf. Schmidt 2006) or "multilateral democracy"

[33] Lijphart (1999) lists only three countries that adhere to this model in the strict sense: UK, New Zealand and Barbados.

(cf. Cheneval 2008). These approaches also open up space for new normative concepts that are applicable to democratisation beyond states (cf. Rittberger/Schimmelpfennig 2006). In arguing the case for non-majoritarian models of democracy these approaches however stand in contrast to democracy models that derive from the "classic" Westminster tradition largely based on majoritarian rule and a clear dualism of government vs. opposition. The current state of play has largely been shaped by the debate between Majone (1998, 2005) and Moravcsik (2002) who have challenged the "standard version" of the democratic deficit and argue the case for a sufficient democratic legitimacy of the European Union and Follesdal/Hix (2006) who claim that the Union's institutional set-up operates on an insufficient democratic basis. As the debate sums up the major strands of the discussion in an exemplary way and is of significant relevance to subsequent issues of citizens' representation and participation, a more detailed look at the authors' individual claims seems a rewarding exercise.

The EU's history of functionalism forms the basis of what Majone has labelled the "regulatory model" of the EU (cf. also chapter IV.1.1). It is based on the assumption that EU policies should follow pareto-improving goals in certain policy sections to the benefit of everybody participating,[34] instead of a majoritarian democratic process in which only the majority would benefit from a redistributive policy. The "regulatory model" also implies a shift of attention away from a state-building perspective towards a concept that sees the EU as an "agency" or a "fourth branch of government" that deals with the delegation of those functional tasks that can be more efficiently handled on a supranational level while other policy sections remain under national sovereignty. In fact the EU

[34] "Pareto efficiency" signifies a situation in which it becomes impossible to have changes that would make one person better off without at the same time making another person worse off. In essence, the term refers to „win-win"-situations, i.e. a system of comparative advantages (cf. also chapter IV 1.2).

is a system of limited competences: it has strong regulatory powers with regard to areas such as the internal market, but lacks power in many other areas, e.g. taxation. The accountability of such an institution is ensured by a design that incorporates the demands of procedural legitimacy, i.e. following democratically enacted statutes and openness to judicial review, and substantive legitimacy, i.e. standards of expertise and problem-solving capacity.[35]

In the context of democratic theory Majone sees the key issue in the specification of which tasks may be legitimately delegated to non-political agencies and which areas should remain under the control of political appointees. The Maastricht Treaty, stipulating that subsidiary powers can be created only for matters directly connected with the core business of the European Community, underlines this assumption (cf. Majone 1998).

Follesdal/Hix (cf. 2006: 543f) on the other hand argue that when looking at the reality of EU politics, in some areas, there is in fact a redistributive allocation of funds that allows for a distinction of winners and losers, e.g. net contributors and net beneficiaries and that these redistributive areas should therefore be subjected to electoral accountable decision-makers.[36] It is necessary to keep in mind that the EU is based on a mixed legitimacy structure that consists of different components which can sometimes follow conflicting interests: the mix between the indirect strand of democratic legitimization (Council) and the direct strand of legitimization (Parliament) and the technocratic search for pareto-improving solutions can be seen as reflecting the dichotomy between political

[35] Cf. the concept of "legitimacy through procedure" (Luhmann 2001).

[36] Majone's concept however can be seen as at least partly accounting for this argument by conceding that redistributive policies can be legitimated only by majoritarian means and that the delegation of tasks to independent supranational institutions should therefore be limited to areas of efficiency-oriented policies. In the event that efficiency-enhancing policies should have redistributive side-effects this does not pose a problem as long as efficiency gains are large enough to compensate for potential disadvantages (cf. Majone 1998: 28).

accountability on the one hand and technocratic consensus on the other. The EU, in this sense, is an example of a political system combining different theoretical strands in which different legitimacy modules are applied to different stages in the decision-making process which are open to democratic contestation (cf. Cheneval 2005: 9f).

Follesdal/Hix (cf. 2006: 545-53) continue to argue that a pluralist democratic contestation would produce other policy outcomes than the technocratic consensus-driven search for pareto solutions. Electoral political contestation would not only lead to policy outcomes that are different, but also better, because the body that took a particular decision (while ruling out other possible solutions) would be accountable for precisely this decision and therefore more trustworthy in its actions. As electoral contests provide incentives for elites to develop rival policy ideas, this in turn would offer more incentives to changes in citizen's preferences. The lack of a "real" political opposition does not only prevent EU citizens from having alternative policy options to choose from, but also excludes the potential electoral battles that would lead to a better connection of the public with accountable political elites. While democratic accountability in the classic sense of voter power and "throwing the rascals out" could indeed lead to more political drama and possibly more transparency, it is however unclear whether this – as a result – would automatically lead to a better "connection" between European representatives and the European citizen. On the contrary, this suggestion involves a significant structural risk: continuing and overt clashes carry the inherent danger of eroding the basis for a basic political consensus that in a Union of now 27 member states, still forms an indispensable condition for the general functioning of the system. As the combination of at times differing national interests and the plurality of political groupings in the EU offer a potentially very high number of conflict lines, cynicism might be the result on the part of the citizen who, by witnessing constant arguments between member states,

could easily become disillusioned about the prospects of the "European project".[37] Moravcsik also doubts that voter apathy can be overcome by expanding participation since the EU is preoccupied by regulatory policies that are mostly not salient enough for the voter to take an interest in (Moravcsik 2002: 615).

Follesdal/Hix (cf. 2006: 536) point out the shortcomings of limited political competition in the context of declining participation in European elections, widely perceived as "second-order" contests. They also show the psychological downside of a complicated EU setting that the citizens do not understand because it is too different from the domestic setting they are used to. In arguing the case for direct electoral accountability, Folledal/Hix however do not address the problem of majority rule with all its potentially destabilising effects and the questions of acceptance of those decisions by minorities. If one takes Scharpf's line of argument seriously, that deliberative electoral competition requires the existence of a common identity, i.e. homogeneity of the voting *demos*, to make the policy outcomes acceptable also for those who did not vote for the majority proposition, the EU clearly does not (yet) fulfil this criterion.

It is in this context highly questionable whether, for instance, in the event that particularly citizens in smaller member states would feel overruled by a majority of others, such a scenario would strengthen the link between EU institutions and citizens in those countries. Lijphart has even gone so far as to claim that under the conditions of plural societies majority rule is not only undemocratic but dangerous because minorities may lose their allegiance to the

[37] Cf. Patterson (1993) and Capella/Jamieson (1997) on the promotion of political cynicism as a result of strategic coverage in the U.S. highlighting conflict. The arguments brought forward in essence mirror the old debate between structural functionalists (e.g. Parsons 1951) and conflict theorists (e.g. Dahrendorf 1959). Whereas the former tend to emphasize the orderliness and stability of society, the latter believe that society is held together by coercion, not by norms and values. Yet Moussis sees the current situation marked by a state of affairs in which citizens "quite sincerely believe that instead of progressing in the field of European unification, the European Union is a theatre of infighting among European politicians" (Moussis 2005: 156).

system as a result of being constantly overruled (cf. Lijphart 1999: 32f). Coming back to the question of the standards of democracy applied to democratic systems, Majone maintains that the process of European integration is inherently a non-majoritarian process and that relevant standards of legitimacy and accountability should reflect this basic fact (cf. Majone 1998: 7). As majoritarian processes are the norm in many member states, the implications of the European non-majoritarian practice such as the legislative primacy of the Council over the Parliament are unfamiliar to a majority of citizens. Accordingly, advocates of a more closely united European Union as a federal state often refer to majoritarian nation-state practices such as the idea that European Commissioners should by elected by the European Parliament. Yet, as the EU – in absence of a European demos and common – identity still lacks significant features of a confederation, notably in that member states remain the masters of the treaties and maintain fiscal authority in the sense of "tax and spend" (Börzel/Risse 2000: 10), the consociational mode of power-sharing constitutes the framework for democratic norms to be applied.

1.5 Conclusion: The Paradox of Legitimacy

As outlined above, the European Union is based on a multilevel framework and, as such, on two strands of democratic legitimacy – an indirect strand via the member states and a direct strand via the European Parliament (cf. Schmidt 2008: 400, Moravcsik 2002: 611).[38] Cheneval argues that "legitimacy" becomes a highly complex concept when applied to the EU as it in fact comprises a whole range of elements: understanding of the EU's structure and its history, its efficiency in providing prosperity and welfare, the constitutional process, external and security policies, democratic government (cf. Cheneval 2005: 2, chapter IV.1.1). The

[38] Cf. also the concept of "legitimacy chains" (cf. Bockenförde 2004).

European Union's double strand of legitimacy also offers paradoxes when its democratic accountability is evaluated from different perspectives. While it is true that a strengthening of the European Parliament's competences would enhance the legitimacy of the decision-making process on the basis of a transnational legitimacy concept and the fact that the Parliament represents the European *demos* as a whole, it would be equally valid to make the opposing claim, i.e. arguing from a state-based legitimacy perspective: an efficient way to increase the democratic legitimacy of the union would actually be to strengthen the (already strong) role of the Council as the body that represents the democratic legitimacy of the member states. The veto power of member states in the Council is the most legitimising element from that point of view, because it safeguards the legitimate interest of a member state from being overruled by "Brussels" (cf. Majone 1998: 12). This example demonstrates that there may be a "natural limit" to the powers of the European Parliament to consider if one wants to preserve the sovereignty of the member states. A further "upgrade" of the European Parliament as a dominant chamber in the legislative process would in fact mean a further shift of powers towards Brussels, however "there is no evidence that even a sizable minority are in favour of establishing a European superstate" (Majone 2005: 187).[39] The often mentioned critique that the European Parliament lacks essential features of "other parliaments" (cf. Holtz-Bacha 2005: 30, de Vreese 2004: 180) seems misplaced in this context, not least with regard to the fact that the European Commission is subject to the approval and control of the European Parliament (Schmidt 2008: 401).

[39] The general contradiction in the debate seems to be that while people demand more power for the European Parliament on the one hand, they want to maintain member states' basic rights on the other – which can happen only through a strong Council that remains at least on a par with the Parliament, if not in a dominant position. For a good overview on the conflicting viewpoints, compare the public debate on the Reform Treaty between Herzog/Gerken (2007) and Hänsch (2007).

To sum up the debate, there is indeed much currency for the view that "the EU is in fact as democratic as it could, or should, be" (Follesdal/Hix 2006: 533). More significantly, this interpretation does not only reflect a mere academic concern, but has also been acknowledged in legal practice. The German Federal Court, in its decision on the Maastricht Treaty came to the conclusion that the European Union was "sufficiently legitimised" (Di Fabio 2001: 12-14). The judgement is based on the argument that the European Union constitutes itself on the basis of international treaties that had been negotiated by democratically legitimised representatives and that had also found the approval of national parliaments. More importantly, since 1979 the European Parliament has contributed a direct representative element that has been strengthened by consecutive treaties ever since. The degree of transparency and the system of checks and balances can nowadays compare to the standard found in most member states.

The opposing positions of Majone and Moravcsik on the one hand and Follesdal/Hix on the other can largely be explained by the theoretical points of view taken. As Follesdal/Hix regard the contestation for political leadership and political accountability as key elements of their democratic deficit assumption, this hints at a nation-based democracy understanding and the application of the majority principle. From this point of view, they might correctly come to the conclusion of a democratic deficit of the EU. Majone and Moravcsik, in contrast, point at the special multilevel structure of the Union and treat its political system as a *sui generis* case and state that the democratic legitimacy of the union is adequate, if not even favourable to that of many national systems. This is not to say that the democratic accountability could not be improved further. The Lisbon Treaty has already strengthened the role of national parliaments and thus re-balanced the very strong position of national executives in favour of the national

legislatives.[40] Evidently, the European Union as an organisation in a process of constant change makes it necessary for critics *and* advocates to re-examine its democratic foundations time and again. New treaties and enlargements constitute new settings – and new assessments.

2. Accountability to a European Public?

A "democratic deficit" or not – widespread concern remains about general participation in the European Project. Studies and surveys such as the Eurobarometer have time and again shown that "Europe" remains a somewhat remote entity to the majority of people. More worryingly, the European Union comes across as "paralysed and impervious to change" (de Vreese 2003: 5). Although the role of the European Parliament, acting as the directly elected representative body of the European people, has risen significantly in importance, voter participation in European elections has decreased in the same period. For some observers, this is an indicator for a generally low esteem with which the Parliament is regarded in the general public and the lack of political drama attached to it (cf. Weidenfeld/Wessels 2006: 34). Others link the downward spiral of public participation to the fact that the functional EU logic of "legitimisation through output legitimacy" has reached its limit (cf. Schäfer 2006) or that the EU suffers from a "credibility crisis" (cf. Majone 2000: 273).

If new treaties and new initiatives have introduced structural reforms for more participation and greater transparency over the decades, how can the deteriorating public support within the same period of time be explained? Already in the early 1980's the EU had arrived at a point where citizens seemed to be tired of integration, this "Eurosclerosis" termed disenchantment was brought in

[40] However, it should not be omitted that because the national parliaments increase the number of political actors, this could potentially slow down the decision-making process, i.e. could have some negative side effect for the procedural efficiency of the system (cf. Jopp/Matl 2006: 219).

connection with economic recession in member states and the inefficient and wasteful expenditure of the vast majority of EU funds in the agricultural sector (cf. Weidenfeld/Wessels 2006: 25). Since the mid 1990's the favourable attitude towards integration that had prevailed during the years of the Jacques Delors Commission has given way to an increasingly critical mood. The gap between citizens' low interest in the integration process on the one hand and the unequalled dynamic of integration and enlargement on the other has widened.

The public appears to be largely sceptical of a further deepening of the integration process and generally perceives "too much" integration rather than "too little" (cf. Green 2000: 293, Gretschmann 2001: 27). The evolution of the EU has seen its institutions extending their powers towards nearly all walks of life, a fact that has become particularly visible with the introduction of the common currency, the EURO. In the process, it has also become increasingly obvious to citizens that their national governments have lost a considerable part of their sovereign ability to regulate and control. Internal policy decisions of a member state now increasingly depend on decisions taken in other member states.

More severely European citizens seem to have lost confidence in the problem-solving abilities of the EU that could compensate for this loss of national sovereignty. Such a loss of faith is a fatal development for an international organisation that, for decades, has promised its citizens long-term economic stability and welfare.[41] Against the backdrop of a globalised economy and competition from other parts of the world, people have increasingly become concerned about unemployment and jobs being shifted abroad. Citizens expect some sort of protection from the EU against this development. However, quite to the contrary, the European integration process itself has become linked to the lowering of social standards and cutting of social benefits, as some member states suddenly find themselves in competition for the provision of cheap labour costs

[41] On the concept of "trust" as a major factor in legitimacy cf. Luhmann (1989), Easton (1975: 447), Hansen/William (1999: 245), Kaina (2007: 87), Delhey (2004: 19).

inside the European Union. In the wake of these developments, the decisive legitimisation of EU membership, i.e. the safeguarding of prosperity and the European social model, has suffered erosion (cf. Dinan 2006: 67).[42] There is increasing support for the notion that decision-makers in Brussels should be more publicly accountable for their actions or at least more visible. As the then Chairman of the European Council, Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, remarked after the failed referenda in 2005:

> "Europe no longer makes people dream … people are not happy with Europe in its current form and that is the reason why they say 'no' to a Europe in the form it should take according to the constitution." (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2005, *author's own translation*)

In order to maintain the future support of its citizens, so the logical conclusion, the Union will have to cultivate greater public support. This would also mean increased "input legitimacy" through enhanced participation. To that end, it is widely assumed, the establishment of broad public debates and the constitution of an open "European Public Sphere" are indispensable. "European integration is not a process independent of mass opinion. Quite to the contrary: because support and legitimacy are necessary, élites and political actors have to work to secure them" (Wessels 1995: 162). This constitutes not only a normative condition within pluralistic democracy concepts in the sense that the inclusion of a maximum of segments of society is a desirable objective in itself, but also has a functional component in the sense of Easton's concept of "diffuse support" which he regards as vital for the survival of political systems as it transcends a purely output-oriented form of legitimacy:

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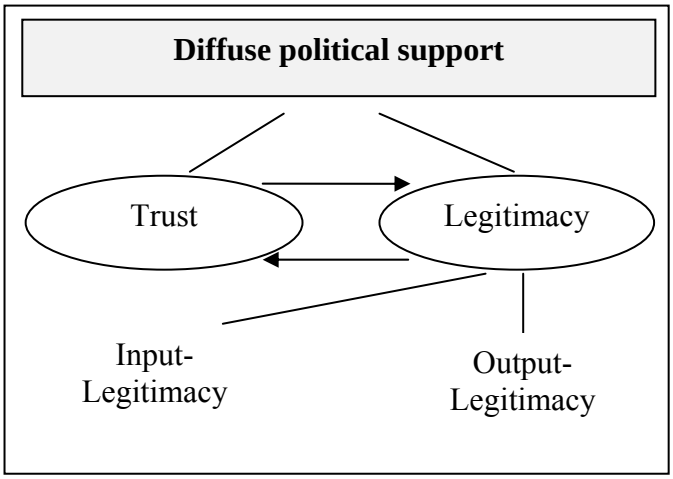
[42] The assumption that people, in the public discourse, are generally most concerned about the economic well-being of the EU whereas political actors tend to focus more on the constitutional matters and governance may also be backed by the findings of Koopmans/Pfetsch (2003) in Germany.

> "[T]he level of diffuse support will normally be independent of outputs and performance in the short run. Typically, such support, representing as it does attachment to political objectives for their own sake, will not be easily dislodged because of current dissatisfaction with what the government does" (Easton 1975: 444f).

As mentioned earlier, the concept of diffuse support is related to the idea of the "permissive consensus", yet the two concepts are not congruent: the "permissive consensus" implies general support within public opinion, it is a passive form of approval which is widespread but rather fragile. It *de facto* authorises governments and EU institutions to negotiate European policies over complex issues to which the general public is largely inattentive to (cf. Norris 1997: 274ff). The idea of the "permissive consensus" is thereby closely linked to the concept of "output legitimacy" and the effective provision of problem solutions. The idea of "diffuse support", on the other hand, also includes a certain degree of input legitimacy.[43] Kaina (2009) has modelled this relationship as illustrated in figure III.1.

[43] "Input-legitimacy" must not necessarily be coupled with formal acts of will-formation such as elections, but can include other forms of participation, i.e. consultations, demonstrations or initiatives.

Figure III.1: Diffuse Political Support for the EU Political System (Kaina 2009)



As a result of long "legitimacy chains"[44] in the European Union, its political system relies on higher degrees of trust for its "diffuse support". The process of creating and maintaining trust, however, demands an intermediary system that acts as a communicative link between the public and the European institutions – a "European Public Sphere" or an equivalent.

2.1 The European Public Sphere

Analogous to the debate on the democratic "fitness" of the European Union, a first assessment of the notion of a "European Public Sphere" almost invariably runs the risk of being compared to public sphere concepts based on the nation state. The mechanisms and structures of a public space that has evolved in correspondence to the multilevel structure of European government may be entirely different from the familiar "single" and all-encompassing public sphere model that citizens have

[44] The distance between those who *govern* and those who are *governed* (cf. chapter III.1).

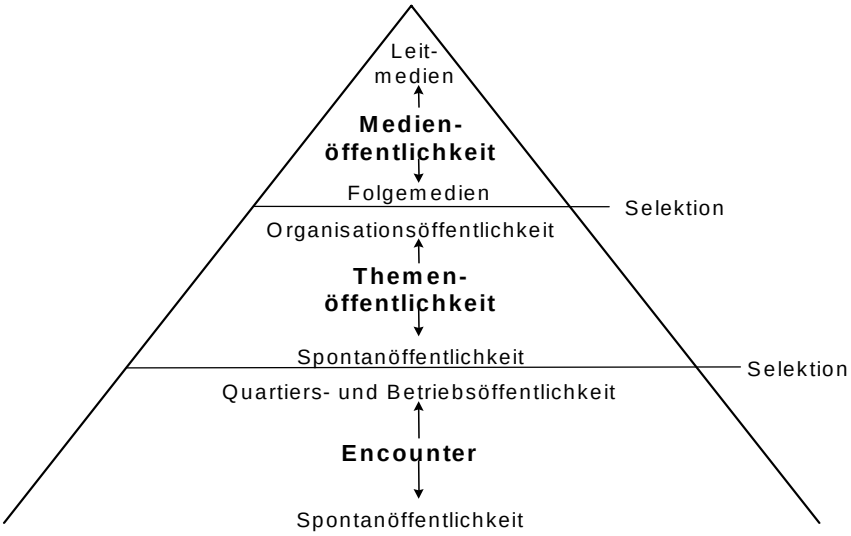
been accustomed to (cf. Trenz 2002: 19).[45] Research on the European Public sphere has blossomed in the past 20 years to the extent that it can even be said to have established a research branch in its own right. Despite the considerable range of approaches, there seems to be a general agreement on the idea that a functioning public sphere forms a basic condition of democracy: political institutions should generally be subject to public control and the actions of politicians should be transparent to citizens in order to be legitimate. There is, however less agreement, on the *form* the public's involvement takes (or rather: should take). The specific difficulty in the assessment of public sphere models is that the term itself is less an empirically describable phenomenon, but an implicitly normative concept (cf. Jarren/Donges 2006: 97).

This normative aspect is particularly apparent in the European context where the existence or non-existence of a European Public sphere is assessed as ranging from forming an insurmountable barrier to European citizen's participation to being hailed as the democratic icing on the cake of the European integration process (cf. Trenz 2003: 161). A useful framework of analysis that could integrate some meso- and marco-level models is to distinguish not only between the specific functions a public sphere is expected to perform in a democratic system (such as transparency or participation), but also to account for different public sphere levels. Jarren/Donges have proposed a scheme that differentiates between an encounter-level (simple and spontaneous forms of communication between individuals), an issue level (a "middle" form of organised communication dealing with a specific topic, e.g. events and demonstrations) and a media publicity level (the "highest" form of organised

[45] The view of a single public sphere with the participation of *all* citizens is to be seen in a more normative context, in practical reality, Habermas, in a review of his initial concept, describes the public sphere as "a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas" (Habermas 1997: 373f).

communication with lasting and clearly defined roles between [media-] communicator and audience).

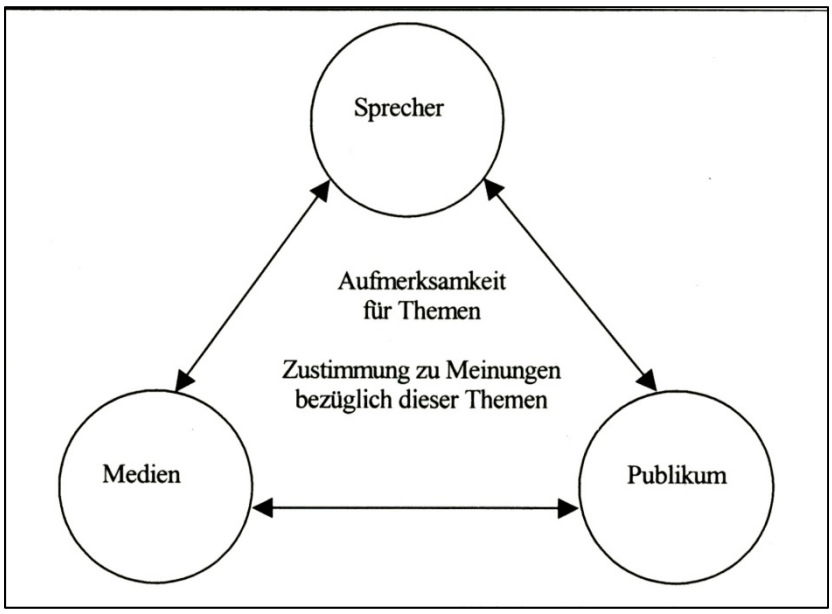
Figure III.2: Public Sphere Levels (Jarren/Donges 2006: 105)



In modern mass democracies, the mass media level forms the decisive entity with regard to public communication. Whereas encounter and issue level communications are usually tied to their local reference systems, the media act as a communicative bridge to bring issues to the attention of a mass audience. This holds particularly true in the European context where spatial distances are even more pronounced than in a nation state and local discourses rarely spill over borders by way of interpersonal communication. Following Neidhardt's popular conception of the public sphere as "an open forum for communication for all those who say something or want to hear what others say" (*author's own translation)*, the mass media enable competing speakers to communicate with an audience in order to call attention to certain issues. The speakers are in fact actors in a public arena where they communicate opinions to smaller or larger numbers

of observers looking on from the galleries, i.e. the audience (cf. Neidhardt 1994: 7). Kantner, drawing on Neidhardt's framework, has graphically conceptualised the interplay between audience, communicator and media as follows:

Figure III.3: Elements of Public Communication according to Neidhardt (1994) and Kantner (2004)



The diagram enables a systematic overview of the basic actors involved in the public communication process and their interrelations (cf. Kantner 2004: 132). It can serve as a useful basis for the empirical analysis of communicator, media and the audience.

A general difficulty in classifying the various approaches within European Public Sphere research is that, although some research traditions draw from

different ideological foundations, their approaches can at times overlap.[46] Habermas' discursive model is normatively demanding in the sense that it regards the public sphere as building a form of communicative cohesion indispensible for the constitution of identity and democratic citizenship (cf. Habermas 1996: 189). Although the notion of a public sphere based on a rational and non-hierarchical discourse has been widely influential in the debate on citizens' democratic participation, its explicit normative foundations and prerogatives have made it less suitable for an on-the-ground analysis of the state of play as far as a common European space is concerned (cf. Berkel 2006: 17).

Equally, the strictly functional-structural public sphere model in the Luhmann mould is largely inadequate for empirical testing, i.e. "hermeneutically insensible" (Kantner 2004: 131). The approaches mentioned in the following contain elements of both schools of thought, less burdened however with "normative ballast" as in the original discourse theory while making use of a holistic systems theory terminology. The functional aspects of a public sphere as 1) conveying information, 2) enabling the formation of opinion and 3) the power of control form a common denominator in almost all public sphere concepts (cf. Gerhards 2000: 287). As far as the role of the media system is concerned, its

[46] Historically, Trenz (2003: 20) describes two original strands in public sphere research: a mainly German-language based school of sociologists within a "critical" framework, including the works of Bücher, Tönnies and eventually Habermas' seminal publication "Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit" (1990) and, from the 1920's onwards, an American school of media sociologists as represented by Lippman with a strong empirical focus on media effects and opinion polling. The 1990's then saw a pronounced theoretical development in the wake of a revised Habermasian model and macro sociological approaches based on Luhmann's systems theory. The constructive debate of actor-centred and systems theoretical premises have thereby led to empirically viable models as exemplified in the works of Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991).

function is to provide issues for public debate (cf. Marcinkowski 1993: 118, Luhmann 1997: 1096ff).[47]

2.2 Overview of European Public Sphere Concepts

With regard to the above mentioned public arena presented by a mass media intermediary system, the concept of the European Public Sphere differs in an essential point from models looking at "closed" national systems: the fact that a European Public Sphere is related to a number of different nationalities. This leaves according to Gerhards essentially two ways of conceptualising a theoretical European public sphere model: firstly, as a single pan-European public sphere that presupposes a common European media and also a common European audience and, secondly, a "Europeanisation" of interacting national public spheres (Gerhards 1993: 100). In a more detailed overview of existing European public sphere models, Wessler (2004) broadly distinguishes three categories: the infrastructural perspective, the cultural perspective and the process perspective. As this classification covers the main areas of debate, it will be described in more detail in the following.

2.2.1 The Infrastructural Perspective

Drawing on the infrastructural conditions that have enabled the emergence of public spheres in the national context, Gerhards names certain conditions that would be equally necessary for the emergence of a single public sphere in Europe, most notably two: the accountability of political actors to a European *demos* and a

[47] "Function", in this respect is not to be confused with the normative idea that the media's legitimacy lies in the constitution of a public sphere. In fact, "most media are not established to serve the public interest as such but to follow some goal of their own choosing" (McQuail 2008: 164).

European-wide operating media system (cf. Gerhards 1993: 107). As both conditions are presently not – or only partially[48] – fulfilled in Europe, there is currently no prospect for a public sphere that assumes a unity of state, territory and society.

Gerhard perceives the public sphere deficit as being directly linked to the (in his view) democratic deficit of the EU. In parallel to the above described debate on the "democracy deficit", this perception appears to be conceptually exclusive when applied to the reality of multilevel systems and the reciprocal effects between legitimacy and publicity.[49] Given this intricate structure, critics see a public sphere concept that mainly refers to the elements direct elections and common language as inappropriate and "undercomplex" (cf. Wessler 2004: 18). With regard to the strict parameters of the institutional approach, Eder/Kanter (2000, *author's own translation*) remark that "public political communication is sought in places where it cannot be found." De Vreese sums it up when saying that the infrastructural concept of a monolithic public sphere – appealing as the idea may be – remains "largely theoretical" and even "naïve" (de Vreese 2003: 9).

2.2.2 The Cultural Perspective

The cultural perspective draws on the assumption that the member states as different systemic segments could overcome systemic differences by adopting a similar "European" culture. Rather than the European unity of decision-making

[48] Cf. chapter IV.1.5 on specialised pan-European media outlets and audiences.

[49] Latzer/Saurwein (2006: 36, *author's own translation*) have noted on this point: "It is therefore practical to assume mutual interaction effects regarding deficits in democracy and the public sphere. Monocausal patterns of explanation and one-sided fixations are neither purposeful with regard to the diagnosis of causes, nor with regard to proposals for solutions. The emergence of a European Public Sphere is, like the democratisation of the political European Union, a process for that politics, the media and citizens are jointly responsible."

and the media, as outlined in the infrastructural perspective, the *cultural* unity of European people is regarded as the decisive factor in this approach. In other words: if citizens had a common "European identity" and if journalists reported from a "European standpoint" to a "European audience" rather than referring to their national perspective, this would eventually lead to the constitution of a common European Public Sphere (cf. Wessler 2004: 19). The idea is that even if media systems remained national, they would share the same set of cultural values that would commit them to reporting things from a European perspective. Yet empirical evidence indicates that European integration through cultural homogenisation does not seem to have made too much progress. On the contrary, globalisation in many ways has led to a strengthening of national and local identities ("glocalisation") (e.g. Schlesinger 1993, Beck 1997). Against this backdrop, a common European identity seems to be more "wishful thinking" (Schlesinger 1993) rather than a realistic prospect.

The variety of cultures in Europe effectively prevents public sphere theories based on the organisation of a nation state from being transferred to the European multilevel structure. Different national political systems, media systems and cultures remain an irrefutable fact in Europe.

2.2.3 The Process Perspective

Referring to the shortcomings of the infrastructural and cultural approaches, it is obvious that the idea of a single pan-European Public Sphere is inherently inept to describe the conditions in multinational settings such as the European Union (cf. Wessler 2004: 23). An equation of the national context with the European will invariably lead to negative conclusions about the state of play of public communication in Europe (cf. Trenz 2002: 21). There nowadays seems to be a consensus in theory-building that the "Europeanisation of national public spheres" presents the most suitable approach when attempting to describe public

communication in the European context (cf. Neidhardt 2006: 47). Such approaches focus on processes of transnational communication rather than a static concept of a public sphere. Such static concepts tend to refer to textbook examples of "ideal" public spheres as applied to homogeneous nation state models. It is not least with regard to this perspective, that Neidhardt sees one of the main problems of European Public Sphere research: in the idealisation of an "overrated" public sphere concept itself. Similar to the "democratic deficit" debate, some scholars tend to apply extremely high standards with regard to the visibility and transparency of European decision-making. Indeed standards that are not even fulfilled in most member states themselves.[50] However, more important is Neidhardt's observation that the transparency of decision-making in political systems is inherently limited to the extent that it allows concessions to be made in order to enable a viable compromise. The more players bargain in a political system, the more important behind-the-scenes negotiation become (cf. Neidhardt 2006: 50).[51] In other words: good governance also requires a certain degree of intransparency (cf. Jestaedt 2001, cited in Neidhardt 2006: 50).[52]

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[50] Neidhardt (2006: 58, *author's own translation*) offers an example for the often limited public discourse in the member states by noting for the German system: "… the functioning of its federal system has apparently not been hampered by the fact that the electorate of *Schleswig-Holstein* knows little about regional problems in *Sachsen-Anhalt* and that Bavarians naturally do not know the Prime Minister of *Mecklenburg-Vorpommern*. Even on the federal level, a considerable part of relevant political decisions are lost on the German mass audience." Also cf. Von Beyme (1994: 332) and Kingdon (1984).

[51] Tricky negotiations in the European Council famously rely on the so-called "Beichtstuhlverfahren": a process in which the chairman meets conflicting parties in a number of bi-lateral confidential meetings in order to explore opportunities for an agreement.

[52] This is not to argue that the principle of "as much transparency as possible" becomes invalid, but to accept the need for non-public bargaining processes under certain circumstances. Cf. Gutmann/Thompson for an opposing viewpoint advocating negotiations under full transparency (cf. Gutmann/Thompson 1996: 95-127).

There have been various attempts to find empirical evidence for a European public sphere in process, most notably by Eder/Kantner (2000) in their research on transnational communication structures. Examining the impact of "European media events", such as the BSE crisis and the fall of the Santer Commission, Eder/Kantner regard the popular notion of a "European Public Sphere deficit" as not empirically viable. The current "crisis" of the EU, marked by dissenting opinions in various member states, could on the contrary be seen as an indication for a higher involvement of citizens: only as long as European citizens had not articulated their dissent, was legitimisation via the "silent majority" possible. By articulating dissent, in turn, consent automatically becomes an issue, too (cf. Eder/Kantner 2000: 319). What they detect in these cases is the notion of a public sphere where "national public spheres address supranational institutions as relevant objects of public communication" and where "national institutions become the subject of public communication in the transnational realm of communication". Also, classic public sphere notions are still very much based on a common historic past and culture, i.e. a set of shared myths and symbols – an increasingly problematic assumption when being applied to the reality of modern societies (Eder/Kantner 2000: 308). A view that is supported by the findings of Bauer/Howard, who examined the people's views on biotechnology issues and concluded that, with regard to technology issues:

> "the mass media continue to serve mainly a national public sphere, setting the agenda and reflecting concerns of a national public. A new technology is however a global phenomenon and many actors transcend the national borders. The emergence of a transnational public opinion, a European public in the making, is reflected in the synchronization of coverage and the assimilation of news framing." (Bauer/Howard 2004: 145)

Koopmans/Pfetsch (2003: 13), in a similar context, speak of "a Europeanised public sphere to the extent that a substantial – and over time an increasing – part

of public communication neither stays confined to its own national political space nor extends beyond Europe without also referring to domestic policy."

In line with these assumptions, the Europeanisation of national public spheres looks at ways national discourses on European topics connect with each other, thereby triggering further discourses. The very process of this networking, so the assumption, can be regarded as constituting a European Public Sphere in its own right. As such a sphere can only be the product of a network of discourses that take place in the member states, the decisive question is as to whether the different national discourses can become linked to each other by points of interface. It essentially means that discourses in certain national arenas need to be recognised in other national arenas, too (cf. Wessler 2004: 20).[53] The process perspective draws on the concept of a Europeanisation of national public spheres as opposed to the strict concept of a single European Public Sphere. The main point of critique that is held against this model is that European issues are not endowed with the same salience in the national media as comparable national issues. Their high complexity, lack of personalisation and supposed "remoteness" from everyday life make European issues seem less newsworthy (cf. chapter IV.1.6). In addition, EU information distribution channels are regarded as being closely linked to journalists' nationalities so that a certain national bias is inherent in many reports (cf. Gerhards 1993: 106). Eder/Kantner do not necessarily see these objections as major obstacles to a Europeanisation of national public spheres: the mere fact that national media are in fact participating in a European discourse and doing so by taking into account the perspective of other European national media while also being prepared to recognise the validity of legitimate interests of other countries, does at least prove the existence of a European-wide media resonance mechanism (cf. Eder/Kantner 2000: 313). The difference to the

[53] Collignon/Al-Sadoon (2006), in their model of stochastic consensus, have shown how rational decisions can emerge as the result of "connected" discourses.

infrastructural model is that the process model puts the emphasis on which issues are communicated in which manner, i.e. the process of communication under "European conditions", instead of how the communication system is organised, i.e. the organisation in national media systems or a single European media system.

2.3 Open Questions

The concept of a European Public Sphere as a process of intertwined national discourses may offer a viable theory of how European communication could be structured. Yet Eder/Kanter (cf. 2000: 328) make an important distinction with regard to the normative element of the public sphere concept which they do not see fulfilled at present. Despite their empirical evidence for a transnationalisation process, they do acknowledge that there are shortcomings with regard to the structural and technical problems in the organisation of a European mass media in a multi-language Europe. One could also criticise the fact that the prominent examples used in the analysis as evidence for a cross European communication process, i.e. the BSE scandal and the resignation of the Santer commission, were actually events with exceptionally high salience and media attention and do not reflect the day-to-day reality of the Brussels policy environment.[54] Another point of criticism consists in the fact that despite those prominent examples of media interest, citizens' knowledge about EU affairs has remained extremely low. This seems contradictory in light of research that notes an increase of EU media coverage over time.

Coming back to the accusation that media coverage was still nationally framed and too less "Europeanised": this seems an all too easy claim to make with regard to the concrete demands of such a coverage which is left largely unclear, i.e. the question of how much Europeanisation is "enough"? Does, for instance, in

[54] Jochen/de Vreese (2003) could demonstrate that the visibility of Europe in TV news doubles during European key events, e.g. summit meetings, compared to routine periods.

terms of covering election campaigns, a truly Europeanised coverage need to reflect on the debate or inputs of 27 member states? Or is it "sufficiently" Europeanised if the views of big countries such as France, the UK and Spain are taken into account or does one need to extent the debate further? Is there a common "Scandinavian perspective" or do Denmark, Sweden and Finland differ too much in order to make a common impact on the European debate? One thing seems clear, though: a European Public Sphere in one way or the other does need to make reference to external points of view and the interactive relationship between at least two, but often more member states and, in addition, the overall relationship with "Brussels". This invariably demands a basic acquaintance with the political system, history and traditions of other member states. A truly Europeanised debate will have to make reference to at least a number of countries or country clusters, if not all 27 member states.[55]

The heterogeneity of the European discourse is not limited to geographic and linguistic differences, but also promoted by the fact that member states have different attitudes towards different European issues, for instance the enlargement process (cf. Sørensen 2008: 5). Whereas some issues are only relevant to certain member states, e.g. the debate on fishery quotas in Spain and Ireland, other countries (with no fishing industry of their own) and their media naturally take a narrow interest in such topics, although it is a "European question", dealt with in Brussels rather than in Madrid or Dublin. This essentially means that, despite

[55] To give an example: the debate on common social standards in the EU, in order to adequately reflect the current range of traditions in Europe, cannot be merely reduced to the liberal "Anglo-Saxon" model versus the German/French social market model. Besides the fact that there are considerable differences between the German and French models, a different tradition can be observed in the form of "country clusters" such as Scandinavian welfare state concepts, the post-Communist Eastern European countries or Mediterranean member states (yet countries within such a cluster are by no means as homogeneous as it seems). In actual fact there are 27 different social welfare systems.

evidence for the emergence of transnational political cleavages within European debates, a strong degree of national segmentation is likely to remain.

3. Conclusion: The "Communication Deficit" – between public myth and real concern

In the context of the "communication deficit" there is a striking paradox: the results of opinion polls clearly show that, on the one hand, the European Public claims to seek to be more informed about European issues,[56] but on the other there is an abundance of information available to them that is apparently not used.

Not least as a result of previous initiatives with the objective of "bringing Europe closer to the citizen" (cf. chapter II.2), the European institutions offer almost every imaginable form of information to those who are willing to access it. The Commission's "Office of Official Publications" publishes hundreds of documents every year. The "Europa" server www.europa.eu gives free and user-friendly access to more than 60 databases which contain several hundred thousand documents in all community languages. The hotline "Europe direct" can be accessed free-of-charge by citizens who have questions about Europe.[57] The EU-Commission does not make any secret of its intentions concerning legislation in preparation. Proposals such as Green Papers or White Papers are available in paper and electronic form; during the preparatory stages interested parties and the

[56] Eurobarometer surveys indicate that three fourths of the citizens say that they are not well informed about the institutions and policies of the European Union (cf. European Commission 2008a: 42) and that the media feature "too little" rather than "too much" about the European Union (European Commission 2005: 17).

[57] The hotline is part of a network comprising about 500 information centres in European cities (cf. http://ec.europa.eu/europedirect/).

public are invited to debate on the options of a policy (cf. Moussis 2005: 154f).[58] Judging by all this information on offer and opportunities of citizen participation, the EU even compares favourably to the information policies in most of its member states.

Summing-up, the European Union's problem is less that of a drought, but rather that of a flood of information (cf. Moussis 2005: 155), resulting in citizens being overburdened with the sheer amount and complexity of information on offer. The fact that most of this information is located outside the realm of the tradition mass media constitutes a further barrier to perception.

> "The high costs for the processing of the political system's information raw material can generally not be burdened on the private citizen. The transparency of the political decision-making process is therefore not to be measured only against the visibility and accessibility of political decision-making procedures, but also against the availability of distribution and translation mechanisms that can process and transmit the raw material of political communication. The alleged lack of transparency of European decision-making processes therefore has to be first of all discussed with regard to the lack of communication of European topics by the mass media." (Trenz 2006: 19, *author's own translation*)

Against this background, newly created information outlets, notably on the internet, may offer useful information to interested persons, i.e. researchers, interest groups and other specialists, but Commission publications and internet sites are mostly ignored as far as the large majority of citizens is concerned. The problem is that the information addresses a few initiated persons rather than the average citizens (cf. Moussis 2005: 156). The gap between a sector-specific special interest audience and the general public is hardly bridged by new internet tools alone, but depends on the occurrence of European topics in the mass media.

[58] The service "your voice", introduced in 2003, is an instrument for public online consultations concerning new policy initiatives (cf. http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice).

The sort of "secondary" public sphere created by the internet serves more as a means of self-observation of those individuals involved than that it constitutes a means of observation by an audience from the gallery (cf. Trenz 2006: 120). This means that the most effective way to provide citizens with information on European issues remains the mass media. This in particular as citizens receive European news *en passant* while consuming their daily media instead of actively seeking Europe-related stories on the web.

> "[C]itizens do not and never will make an effort to get the existing information, but rightly expect that they will be automatically informed, through their familiar media, about European affairs and decisions that are of interest to them. When they say in Eurobarometer surveys that they want to be informed about the institutions and policies of the EU, they mean that this information should come to them, not that they should go after it." (Moussis 2005: 155)

The mass media have an exceptional position with regard to the provision of political information. The impact of media coverage on the formation of public opinion is thereby the bigger, the further away an issue is from the direct realm of experience of citizens. Judgements about politics are therefore predominantly the result of the perception of politicians and parties on the basis of political coverage in the mass media. Citizens regard those issues as important that are frequently mentioned in the media (cf. Maurer 2003: 57ff, Tenscher 2009: 496). The objective of "bringing Europe closer to the citizens" therefore heavily relies on 1) the frequency of EU related topics in the mass media and 2) their framing by the individual media outlets. These two components reflect the quantitative and qualitative dimension of the European "communication deficit" (cf. chapter II). In order to find an explanation for the apparent shortcomings of EU topics in the mass media, analysing the context factors for EU-related coverage seem helpful, notably in contrast to conditions in the national context. In the following, specific

multilevel factors are described which are thought to exert an influence on the frequency and quality of EU topics in the European mass media.

IV A Framework for EU Communication

The EU, as an object of analysis, makes it hard for the observer to gain access, because it has been undergoing a process of continuous change. Not only does the EU form a unique political entity, but through its multilevel design it distinguishes itself from domestic political systems by its high degree of complexity (Kohler-Koch et al. 2004: 18). A framework for EU Communication demands a proper understanding of those specific European conditions that fundamentally distinguish the EU as a multilevel system from national governments. The first part therefore examines the EU's internal power structures and working methods, notably the legislative co-decision procedure, the "Monnet-Method" and multilevel phenomena such as the "collective action problem" and the "blame game". Following, the concept of a "European identity" and the specifications of a European media landscape are described in the context of their relevance for the political communication process. The first part ends with a conclusion about complexity as a key factor in EU communication.

Based on these insights, the second part of the chapter proposes a framework for EU communication that distinguishes between an expert and a general public audience and, in the third part, defines the "communication deficit" as reflecting the gap between expert sphere and general public sphere.

Part four and five make reference to the outstanding position of the Commission's spokesperson service within European media relations and develop a model for European media relations based on the interaction process between spokespersons and journalists.

1. Specific European Conditions

1.1 Historic Foundations: Federalist vs. Functionalist logic

The EU can only be understood in the context of its historical development and its conflicting and converging narratives (cf. Cheneval 2005: 4). Narratives are important for political systems, they provide a sense of identity and, in doing so, they also provide a certain form of legitimacy (cf. Banchoff/Mitchell 1999: 195). The concept of the nation state, for instance, relies heavily on tradition and historical narrative structures. The EU, in the context of its 50 years of existence, has evolved from a purely technical, problem-solving bureaucracy towards an increasingly nation-state-like governmental system. This very specific historical evolution bears often subtle, but nevertheless important implications of how the EU is perceived by the general public and political elites and how the EU relates to its member states. The debate, for instance, on whether the EU needs a constitution or would fare better without, is directly related to the history of European integration.

The start-up phase of the European project was shaped by the immediate situation after World War II: destruction, a destabilised economy and a no less destabilised society. The almost inevitable question most Europeans were faced with was how to avoid such a scenario in the future. With the negative effects of a fierce nationalism still all too apparent, the post-war situation suggested a new emphasis on cooperation instead of a return to nationalism. As far as integration theories go, there were two theoretical concepts on offer: federalism and functionalism. The former took the view that nationalism could only be overcome by the establishment of a federal state, a sort of "United States of Europe".[59] The

[59] The idea of a "Pan-European Union" was already expressed as early as in the 1920's by Coudenhove-Kalergy (1926), then as a reaction to World War I, but it was not before Churchill's famous Zurich speech in 1946 with its vision of a "United States of Europe" that Coudenhove-Kalergy's concept experienced a renaissance and received wider recognition. As one of the most prominent proponents of the federalist approach to European integration Altiero Spinelli (1972)

functionalist approach, on the contrary, rests on the principle that peace is best achieved not through a "grand vision" but through step-by-step international cooperation in specific sectors which are "technical" and therefore offer limited scope for political conflict.[60] Cooperation is thereby strengthened by the establishment of functional agencies that – as joint institutions – oversee cooperation between the participating states. These agencies should, however, not be headed by politicians or diplomats, but experts in their respective fields. The institutionalised cooperation of experts was seen as desirable by functionalists because this specific form of non-political and issue-related cooperation has an inherent tendency to extend the scope of joint undertakings and to include new areas where it seems beneficial to do so – the functionalist "spillover logic"[61] (Kohler-Koch et al. 2004: 60). The attractiveness of the functionalist cooperation model subsequently formed the underlying rationale of the Schuman Plan[62] und the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) by the 1951 Paris Treaty: a common market for coal and steel offered economic benefits by ensuring supply for the reconstruction of European industries as well as peace-

had advocated the foundation of a "European Union" on the grounds that following the devastating experience of the war, the nation states had lost their *raison d'être* in providing their citizens with political and economic safety. For an updated concept of a federal European government in the 21st century cf. Guy Verhofstadt "The United States of Europe" (2006).

[60] The functionalist approach was pioneered by David Mitrany and his book "A working peace system" (1946). After the League of Nation's failure to guarantee lasting peace, functionalists perceived a weakness of federalist theory in that the establishment of federations was all too often regarded as a means in itself and neglecting to provide tangible benefits of cooperation.

[61] The "spillover effect" is defined by Lindberg (1963: 10) as: "a situation in which a given action, related to a specific goal, creates a situation in which the original goal can be assured only by taking further actions, which in turn create further actions and so forth."

[62] In accordance, the opening remarks of the Schuman declaration emphasised the procedural nature of European integration: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity" (Schuman 1950: 1).

keeping benefits in the form of incorporating and taming Germany's heavy industry. The ECSC as the nucleus of European integration could convince sceptics of such a form of international cooperation between former enemies precisely because the technocratic nature of the project and its being limited to a small segment. This seemed acceptable also to those critics who feared a shedding of too much sovereign power (cf. Kohler-Koch et al 2004: 60).

Since the ECSC very soon proved to be a success, it was not long before the integration of other economic sectors followed suit, culminating in the 1957 Treaties of Rome and the creation of the European Community (EC) consisting of the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC) and the European Economic Community (EEC) with the objective of creating a common market between the member states. The functional expansion of cooperation to new policy fields has been labelled the "Community method" or, after one of its main advocates, "Monnet Method". Several accession rounds saw the number of member states continuously increasing from the original six to 27 member states in 2007.[63] As far as the range of European policies was concerned, the signature of new treaties steadily increased the community's scope of action: in 1987, the Single European Act extended economic cooperation further towards an even more integrated internal market. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty signified a quantum leap in the European integration process, notably with the decision for a common monetary policy and the addition of the two policy pillars "Judicial and Home Affairs"

[63] The first accession round took place in 1973 with the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark joining the EC. As part of the "Southern enlargement" Greece followed in 1981 and Spain and Portugal in 1986. The "Northern enlargement" saw Austria, Finland and Sweden becoming members in 1995 and the "Eastern enlargement" included the former communist countries Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the two Mediterranean islands Cyprus and Malta in 2004. With a short delay, Bulgaria and Romania acceded in 2007.

(JHA)[64] and the "Common Foreign and Security Policy" (CFSP) under the newly constructed roof of the "European Union". The signature of the Treaties of Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2001) added further modifications to the European Union structure while maintaining the principle institutional setup and three pillar structure (cf. Moussis 2005: 14ff).

The ever growing sphere of influence of community policies and increasing spillover effects with regard to policy areas that exceeded purely economic aspects was accompanied by an increasing call for more democratic accountability of the European institutions. Although, from 1979 onwards, a directly elected European Parliament had brought an element of representative democratic control to the community institutions, the Parliament's initially very limited powers and mere advisory role in the legislative process clearly demonstrated that EC/EU policies still remained in the grip of member state governments. The perceived lack of input legitimacy was hitherto compensated by the functional logic: firstly by the assumption that everybody benefited from the advantages of this system and secondly, the fact that up until the Treaty of Maastricht, common policies were limited to the field of "low politics", i.e. issues with comparatively low political salience. In order to account for this development, the Maastricht Treaty considerably strengthened the powers of the European Parliament which in the future developed hand in hand with the further integration of other policy fields.[65]

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[64] Later to become "Police and Judicial Cooperation in Criminal Matters" (PJCC) in the wake of the Amsterdam Treaty's provision for a common "Area of Freedom, Security and Justice".

[65] The Treaties of Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2002) in particular have extended the influence of Parliament in the legislative process to nearly all fields of policymaking. Regarding issues such as health policy, consumer protection or asylum matters the Parliament acts and decides on the same footing as the Council of Ministers. The of range policy field covered by the co-decision procedure (cf. chapter IV.1.3) has been further extended by the Lisbon Treaty.

However, in spite of this development towards greater public accountability, the European project, in its core, has remained a project predominantly driven by political and economic elites and the notion of the "permissive consensus" of European citizens to the actions of European elites. The success of the functionalist approach in the past notwithstanding, integration in the post Maastricht union seems to have reached a level where technocratic functionalism no longer offers a self-evident formula for further enlargement steps. At this stage, so the argument of federalists, a clear vision is needed about where the European project wants to go.[66] The revival of federalist ideas, which despite the functionalist mainstream have persisted throughout the decades, are in many ways a logical consequence of a development where so many policy fields have become integrated that the EU indeed increasingly resembles a federal state.[67] The recurring debate about the "finality" of the European Union and the call for a "European Constitution" have been reflections of this situation. The attempt to establish a constitution, containing several state-like symbols and federal elements, was however declined by referenda in France and The Netherlands in 2005. While the reasons for this rejection were multifaceted (cf. chapter II.1.1), it is clear that the historical context of integration and its functionalist foundations make the idea of a constitution somewhat ambivalent. After all, constitutions mostly refer to a unity of people, geographical space and institutional settings. The European Union, in contrast, is still marked by constant change: the change in the number of member states, the change in the number and

[66] Cf. the speech given by former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer at the Humbold University Berlin (2001).

[67] Cf. chapter III.1 and Lijphart's comparison of the European Union's political system with consensual domestic systems in Switzerland and Belgium (cf. Lijphart 1999: 34). Robert Schuman himself believed in a political integration in an advanced stage of integration and Altiero Spinelli presented his "Draft for a Treaty establishing the European Union" to the European Parliament as early as 1984.

scope of policy fields, and not least, the change in the number of responsible actors. It is precisely one of the main characteristics of the functionalist approach that makes the European Union ambiguous with regard to its final stage: while some guidelines are defined, the final aim of the process is intentionally left open.[68] Compared to the constitutional "founding myths" that serve as the foundation of many member states' source of identity (cf. Grimm 2004: 455ff), the technocratic basis of the functionalist approach offers a considerably less emotional basis for cohesion.[69]

It remains debatable whether European citizens prefer a European federation to the functional concept or vice versa and whether the constitution contained "too much Europe" or "not enough Europe". Yet, it is remarkable how the European elites reacted to the rejection of the European constitution: its "successor", the Lisbon Treaty, was stripped of all its federal symbols. In essence, this means a conscious resort to the established functional practice. Against this backdrop, the expected effects on communicating European integration seem obvious, too: a continued emphasis on the practical benefits of cooperation instead of relying on a "grand vision". While such a vision could potentially offer a strong source of identification for the general public (and therefore for political communication efforts aiming to bring Europe closer to its citizens), the functionalist approach offers a special kind of appeal of its own: it is indeed so attractive that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which, after their liberation from the iron curtain, had the option of joining the outer circle of the free trade EFTA/EEA or the inner circle of the EU, have unhesitatingly opted for the latter. The attraction it exerts on neighbouring countries is a demonstration of the validity of the EU integration method without a specified end, even more in

[68] The European Union's motto "United in Diversity" is in some ways reflecting this ambiguity.

[69] Unless the technocratic nature is seen as a founding myth in itself as suggested by Hansen/William (cf. 1999: 240). An interesting postmodern take this may be, but the emotional cohesion such a concept offers to European citizens remains questionable at best.

view of the fact that the newcomers accede to an ever closer union, meaning that they are prepared to adopt the whole "aquis communautaire" (cf. Moussis 2005: 16f).[70] The functionalist approach with its emphasis on gaining economic and political advantages by ceding parts of their national sovereignties to a supranational organisation may even be perceived as less "threatening" in comparison to joining a federal "United States of Europe", in particular to those post-communist member states that had gained sovereignty fairly recently in their history. However, the increase in the number of member states has also led to increasing externalities with regard to collective decision-making which will be described in the following.

1.2 The "Collective Action Problem" and the "Blame Game"

In its economic domain, the EU has been devised as a system of comparative advantages, i.e. the idea that membership of the European Union is thought to offer more benefits than disadvantages for those participating.[71] The multilevel setting, with its division of powers between nation state level and supranational level, can in some cases lead to distortions with regard to the allocation of these benefits. Following Olson and his analysis of the logic of collective action a distinction must be made between policies delivering "inclusive public goods" and "exclusive public goods" (cf. Olson 1985: 39f). Inclusive public goods are those where the cost-value ratio is clear to anyone participating. In short: as every member state benefits from the provision of public goods (e.g. the European Galileo Satellite navigation system), they are willing to provide their share of resources for the production of such goods.

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[70] The "aquis" is estimated to comprise a volume of approximately 85.000 pages of legislative norms enacted by the elder members of the Union.

[71] For the collective benefits of the internal market cf. the "Cecchini report" (Cecchini 1988) and for a more recent evaluation Bornschier (2000).

Exclusive public goods are those where the allocation of costs and benefits is unclear. In this situation, every member state tries to limit its own contribution and benefit from the work of others instead ("free-rider mentality") (cf. Collignon 2006: 4). The collective benefit is only ensured when every member participates in the production of public goods. In the event that only one member does not participate, other group members have to pay the price for this non participation.[72] The result of this dilemma is a "collective action problem" which is more likely to occur the larger the number of group members participating becomes, because the smaller the group, the better the contribution of each member can be controlled. Whereas in a European Union of 6 or 12 member states it was comparatively easy to maintain a general atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation, the sharp increase in member states has significantly complicated the provision and control of exclusive collective goods, because the finding of workable solutions on the basis of consensus have been more difficult, as the possibility of blocking decisions has increased exponentially (Collignon 2006: 5).

According to Collignon (2006: 5), Europe faces a problem because the distinction between inclusive and exclusive public goods is not well enough understood and that the just provision of external collective goods requires firm rules and an additional transfer of powers to the supranational level.[73] The

[72] Olsen states that exclusive goods imply an "all or nothing" principle: either everybody participates or there is no common project. This fact endows individual members with an extraordinary bargaining power for instance under decision-making conditions that require unanimity (cf. Olsen 1985: 40). This particular aspect has been increasingly discussed in the wake of failed referenda on European Treaties and the "re-negotiation" of terms for individual member states. In a situation where the agreement of every member state is necessary for the common progress it can make sense for individual member states to tactically refuse approval for a Treaty in order to gain additional individual benefits from negotiations that may follow.

[73] With regard to the European Monetary Union (EMU) and its provision of monetary stability as an exclusive public good, Collignon has shown how the Stability and Growth Pact in combination

collective action problem has a significant impact on how policy outputs are communicated to external audiences:

> "Under multilevel governance, governments then bargain for solutions, which make the distribution of costs and benefits acceptable *for them* or to the specific constituency they represent. At the EU-level, heterogeneous policy preferences are made consistent. However, neither the outcome of the bargain, nor the bargaining process itself, is supposed to change *ex ante* preferences within the national framework. Therefore the underlying preferences remain inconsistent. The bargained solution is 'sold' as the best possible result given the constraints, or as a 'minimised loss'. But for ordinary citizens, a loss is a loss, whether minimised or not. Because there is no political competition at the European level for alternative policy solutions, none is accountable for the optimality of *European* policy decisions, and governments do not have to convince voters that a policy decision is optimal with respect to the provision of European collective goods." (Collignon 2003: 26, *passages highlighted in italics in the original text*)

The quote exemplifies how the multilevel logic, under the conditions of high complexity and limited insight to the decision-making process, in certain situations encourages a sort of double-game behaviour by political actors. Certain policy constellations may make it rational for a national minister to advocate a certain policy behind closed doors in Brussels (e.g. a necessary, but unpopular decision), but then publicly criticise this decision in his or her home constituency and national media. This sort of strategic behaviour, which has alternatively been labelled as "blame-game", "scapegoating", "two-level game" or – in its reversed form "credit-taking" – is a commonplace reality in European politics and the origin of many eurosceptical media reports (cf. Moravcsik 1993: 515,

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with domestic, fiscal policies can lead to a collective action problem concerning macroeconomic stability (Collignon 2003).

Gretschmann 2001: 27, Meyer 2004: 139).[74] The "blame game" perhaps most vividly reflects the sometimes diametrically opposed rational choice logics of politicians who act in national and European arenas. For the EU's political communication process the "blame game" however presents a major barrier. There are multiple reasons why this strategy is effective: first of all, Council meetings are non-public and the individual contribution of single ministers remains in most cases undisclosed (cf. Meyer 2004: 138, Lewis 1998: 480f). Secondly, most press conferences national players give on issues negotiated in Brussels take place in their domestic environment in national capitals where journalists often lack the background knowledge of their Brussels counterparts. The result is a "control deficit" that originates in the asymmetries of awareness and information separating the editorial offices in Brussels and the member states and which allow national governments to play the European level off against the national (Meyer 2004: 142).[75]

Wessels (2008: 46) has classified this type of national politicians who are also active in the Brussels arena as "multilevel players" who have an advantage over players who are confined to just one level, i.e. "European players" and "national players". The Commission must be regarded as one such "European player" who, in communicating, is constrained by a lack of direct channels to the member states. However, it is essentially the widespread unawareness of citizens

[74] The somewhat self-serving interpretation of European decisions by political actors in the domestic context is supported by the findings of Koopmans/Pfetsch (cf. 2006: 30) who find that the media, when speaking with their own voice, act more as motors of Europeanisation whereas national political elites of the state and political parties are much more inclined to keep the public debate within national boundaries.

[75] Meyer's suggestion to thwart this practise by making Council sessions public, however, seems rather idealistic against the view that political systems rely on a certain degree of non-transparency in order to reach a consensus among member states (cf. chapter III, 2.2.3). However, the European Council has adopted in its conclusions from 16th-17th June 2006 that Council sessions should be made partly public (cf. Wessels 2008: 197f).

about how "Brussels" functions and a process of framing that allows the blame game to continue, and this poses one of the biggest challenges to European communication policy (cf. Schlesinger 1999: 286).[76] The problem of the "blame game" is thereby further aggravated by the intricate mode of the EU decision-making process.

1.3 The European Union Decision-Making Process: Intricacy of Design

In order to understand the political reality of Europe, "a considerable part of one's attention must be devoted to the system of the European Union (EU) and its institutional architecture. This is particularly true with regard to understanding the different forms of 'governing', i.e. the way the EU institutions prepare, adopt, implement and control decisions that are binding for the member states and European citizens" (Wessels 2008: 17, *author's own translation*).

One of the characteristic features of the European framework is the impossibility of mapping functions onto specific institutions. The EU legislative procedure is not a straightforward affair, but rather a legislative process in which different political institutions have different parts to play (cf. Majone 1998: 8). Accordingly, the European Union has no single identifiable executive as the executive powers are shared between the Council, the Commission and the local member state governments. This fact makes it difficult for the observer to allocate responsibility for the decisions taken. Under the Nice Treaty there are no less than

[76] Page/Shapiro (1992) have pointed out at the influence of elite cues on public opinion as for instance made by politicians and which can, at times, be deliberately misleading. In a similar vein Zaller has defined "elite domination" over public opinion "as a situation in which elites induce citizens to hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis" (Zaller 1992: 313). The "blame game" could thus be regarded as a strategy of elite cues operating on different levels while consciously making use of insufficient knowledge and information levels on the part of the audience.

50 (!) different modes of taking decisions,[77] i.e. different combinations of single or shared responsibility of Council and Parliament and different majority demands that apply to different policy fields (cf. Tekin/Wessels 2006: 107).

The institutions of the European Union as envisaged by the Treaty of Rome are in fact highly transparent (at least when compared to most governmental systems in the member states) in that its provisions contain a general requirement to give reasons for bureaucratic decisions.[78] However, the procedural legitimacy of the decision-making process has been exacerbated by a steadily growing number of committees, working groups and agencies.[79] The complexity of a number of such bodies interacting, in particular with regard to the different rules by which they are governed by, results in a serious lack of transparency in so far as it seems almost impossible for the citizens of the European Union to understand which body is responsible for decisions that apply to them (cf. Majone 1998: 22). Among the many legal procedures of the EU, the co-decision procedure is the main legislative procedure by which European law becomes adopted. The co-decision procedure gives the European Parliament the power to adopt legislation jointly with the Council of the European Union (on a proposal by the Commission), requiring the two bodies to agree on an identical

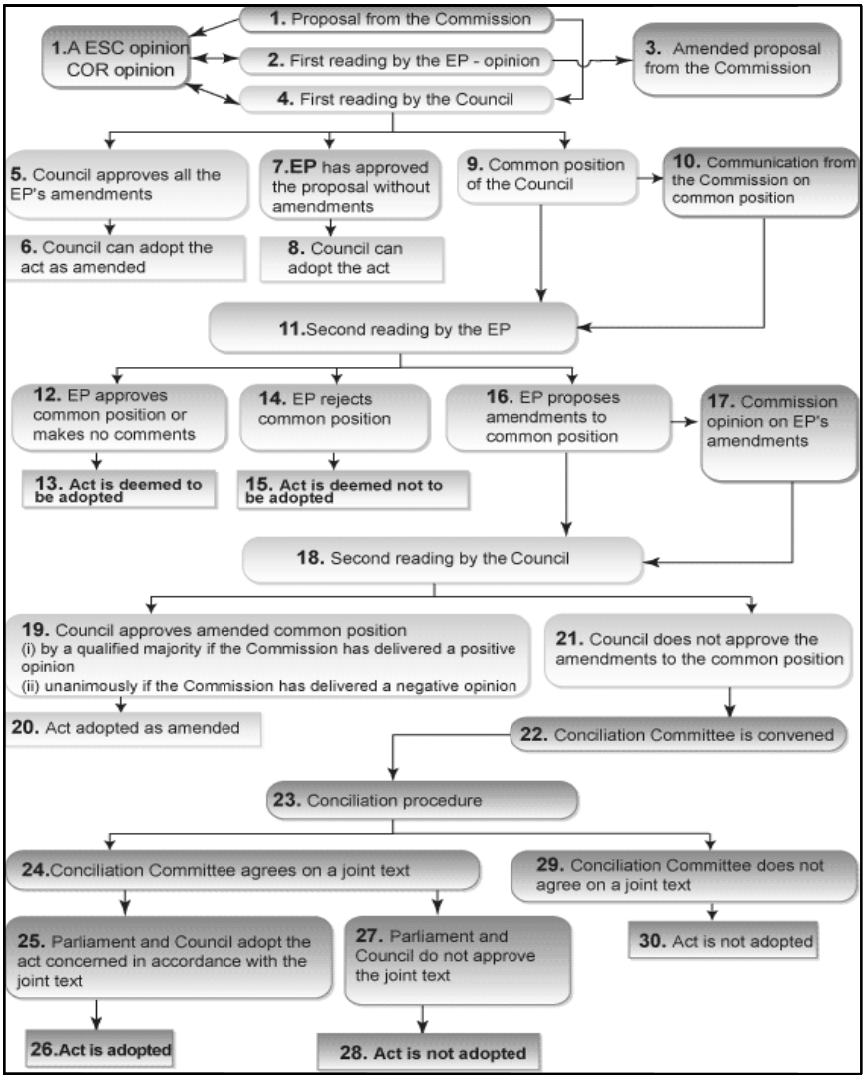
[77] The Lisbon Reform Treaty will see a reduction to 45 variations (Tekin/Wessels 2006: 107).

[78] The "European Transparency Initiative", adopted by the European Commission in 2005 is aimed to improve transparency further, e.g. with regard to the implementation of Community funds, consultations with civil society and the role of the lobbies and NGOs in the European institutions' decision-making process (cf. European Commission 2006c).

[79] In the preparation of legal acts, the Commission is assisted by a network of expert groups and committees. This "comitology" labelled system comprises more than 1700 of these bodies (cf. Wessels 2008: 234f). Neidhardt, with a nod to critics who point at an over-bureaucratisation of EU policies, notes that "the EU is a political compromise-building machinery" and that without this form of negation-democracy "not much would be accomplished" (Neidhardt 2006: 50 *author's own translation*).

text before any proposal can become law. The decision-making process under the co-decision procedure is, to say the least, highly intricate in its design.

Figure IV.1: The Co-Decision Procedure



Source: European Commission, www.europa.eu (2009)

Apart from reflecting the ongoing power struggle between the Parliament and the Council, the complicated nature of the decision-making process makes it difficult to communicate clear responsibility for EU decisions, i.e. the question of which

institution can be blamed for a certain decision taken under the co-decision procedure: the Commission for its initial proposal? The European Parliament and the Council for subsequent amendments to the legal texts? The Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions for their influence via consultations? As far as the Council and the member states are concerned, the Nice Treaty requires for a legal act to be adopted a "triple majority": a majority of member states (i.e. at least 14 out of 27), a majority of weighed votes in the Council (i.e. at least 255 out of 345) and a majority of European citizens (on request of a member state at least 62 per cent of the European Union's total population) (cf. Wessels 2008: 202f).[80]

Although the Lisbon Treaty has introduced a certain degree of simplification, the reduction of the complexity of the process is only marginal. Although there is widespread consensus on the appropriateness of the co-decision procedure for multilevel government, its weaknesses, namely a lack of transparency and comprehensibility, will remain also under the new regime (cf. Wessels 2008: 351). Summing up the nature of EU's the institutional design and intricate decision-making process, Wessels (2008: 18, *author's own translation*) states that the complexity of the EU system makes it both "fascinating and frustrating": "In the light of an increasing institutional complexity the EU system becomes unfortunately also increasingly incomprehensible. A short description that would offer a sufficient insight or overview is therefore not possible." What is an already rather sober statement with regard to an academic audience becomes all the more significant when applied to the discourse on EU topics in the media. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that "reporting patterns tend to obscure ... where, and by whom, influence has been exerted, as well as leaving shrouded the compromises that have been entered into by national representatives" (Schlesinger 1999: 270). The complex decision-making structure in which

[80] This mode of decision-making will continue for a transitory period also under the Lisbon Treaty whose provisions foresee a system of a "double majority" to enter into force as of 2014.

national and supranational elements are blended together also affects European citizens' sense of identification with the European institutions which are generally perceived as being more distant in comparison to the domestic institutions. The level to which citizens feel "European", however, forms an important context factor in the communication process, in particular for the acceptance of those policy decisions that are taken on the European level.

1.4 European Identity

The concept of a common "European identity" is central to the question of which democratic model is feasible for the multilevel reality of the European Union. The legitimacy of political decisions depends on the acceptance also of those sections of society that do not form a majority. Do citizens in member states accept the decisions of an elite so that a stable and lasting development of the European union is ensured? The transition of power from member state level to the supranational European level is therefore directly related to a sense of a common collective identity (cf. Scharpf 1999: 7ff, Nissen 2004: 21, Kania 2009: 47).[81]

Whether a common European identity should be seen as the prerequisite of a common European Public Sphere (cf. chapter III.2.1) or whether it should be regarded as the result of it, remains debatable. In any case, there can be agreement on the fact that there has to be at least a basic common space of shared experiences and identities that allows communication to "connect" (cf. Trenz

[81] Identity in this context refers to what Max Weber has called a "Gemeinschaftsglaube" originating from a common history, language, culture and ethnicity (Weber 1972). In view of the "hard" political relevance of the identity concept Kaina refers to a "political collective identity" when acceptance of supranational decisions are concerned which may not in all cases require, e.g. a common language. More generally, collective identities can be seen as forming "resistant dispositions of mutual loyalty, solidarity and trust between members of a collective" (Kaina 2007: 42, *author's own translation*).

2006: 122f). This criterion might already be fulfilled by a group of European elite actors (cf. Schlesinger 1999), but less so by the general European public who time and again have voiced scepticism towards a further "Europeanisation" of national policies. Among the seemingly contradictory conclusions that can be drawn from opinion polls after failed referendums on EU treaties is that citizens still overwhelmingly feel in favour of the European project and would like it to advance, but in the concrete case have impeded its further evolution. Nissen explains this behaviour by distinguishing between an "affective dimension" and a "utilitarian dimension" of European identity (cf. Nissen 2004: 23). As far as the utilitarian aspect is concerned, this is reflected by the persistence of national frames in the media coverage. Here, the communication of a European identity versus a national identity is hampered by the political logic in member states: the frame of "winning" or "losing out" in comparison to other member states (as, for instance, exemplified in the debate on "net payers" and "net beneficiaries" of the European budget) is a strategically more attractive option in domestic political battles than the endorsement of solidarity and the public European good (cf. chapter IV.1.2 on the "blame game").

On the other hand, Eurobarometer data shows no over time change in the affective dimension and people's general readiness to identify with Europe – 53 per cent of EU citizens feel European at least to a certain degree. There are, however, significant differences between member states: almost 30 per cent of people in Luxembourg even describe themselves as "European only" or "European plus nationality", whereas only 6 per cent of people in the UK and Denmark were prepared to make such a statement (cf. Nissen 2004: 23). Europeans seem to agree in merely three areas: the common currency, peace and the freedom of movement. There are also considerable differences between member states with regard to issues such as cultural diversity, bureaucracy or the

misallocation of funds (cf. Kufer 2009: 42f).[82] Apart from such national idiosyncrasies, the personal economic situation on the individual level can serve as a predictor for the readiness with which supranational identities are embraced: in rich countries, people with a comparatively low socio-economic status tend to have high evaluation of their own nationality and perceive the EU as a threat to their own collective identity. People in economically less powerful states feel more positive towards supranational communities (cf. Dubé/Magni-Berton 2009: 83). Economic reasons were also seen as contributing to a change in perception of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland which after the initial "no" experienced increasing level of approval. The former president of the European Parliament, the Irishman Pat Cox, remarked with reference to a growing sense of European identity in times of economic recession:

> "I think when we are in stormy seas a safe harbour is a very attractive place. We have an instinct and understanding of where we belong and that it makes sense to be among friends especially if you feel under stress. So the crisis may be the explanation for this change of public opinion rather than some fundamental re-evaluation of the numerous details of the Lisbon Treaty." (Cox 2009: 15)

The persisting impact of national identities in combination with shifting perceptions towards Europe indicate the concept of a European identity not as an exclusive construct, but as complementary to the national identity as referred to in the "Russian puppets" model: people simultaneously experience local, regional, national and European identities (cf. Meinhof 2001: 112). Despite significant

[82] With regard to the two mentioned cases Denmark and the UK, euroscepticism in those countries apparently feeds off different reasons: whereas Great Britain's negative attitude towards Europe seems to be founded on an apprehension of a diminished influence of the British empire and a "fall from greatness", Denmark's resistance is regarded as the product of a so-called "Lilliput chauvinism", the fear of being "overrun" by the large neighbour (cf. Schrøder 2004: 206f).

differences within member states as to which extent the concept of multiple identities (i.e. feeling national *and* European) is embraced, for the majority of EU citizens national and European identity do not exclude each other, but the national dimension still takes precedence over European dimension (Fuchs et al. 2009: 108).

For the mediatisation of European policies this means that although modernisation theories point at a segmentation of societies along functional lines, the idea of the nation state as a system persists as a dominant frame of reference. The concept of a Europe of nation states has endured even the military, economic and ideological superstructures provided by the Soviet Union and, in the case of the Yugoslav federation, even led to the collapse of federal states. Notwithstanding that multilingual functional elites increasingly identify themselves as "European" and the fact that substantial political decisions are nowadays taken on the European level, the handling of economic and socio-cultural conflicts and the reconciliation of interests in member states still demand the nation state as an integrative framework with a linguistic homogeneity that is not (yet) given on a European level (cf. Lepsius 2004: 3-5). The EU political system is thereby characterised by different segments of Europeanised societal groups that co-exist with groups predominantly rooted in their national identity and which, as Lepsius remarks "require intermediation between each other" (Lepsius 2004: 5 *author's own translation*).

This process of intermediation, in modern societies, is performed by the media. Yet it is unclear, whether a "Europeanised" national media coverage can fulfil this process sufficiently or whether transnational media outlets have – at least partly – taken over this function. Brüggemann/Schulz-Forberg (cf. 2009: 698) have noticed an increasing trend towards further segmentation in which general interest media outlets are losing audience shares at the expense of specialised and transnational media outlets. The following paragraph therefore

looks at some of these specific European media outlets in the context of their information provision to a "Europeanised" audience.

1.5 The European Media Landscape

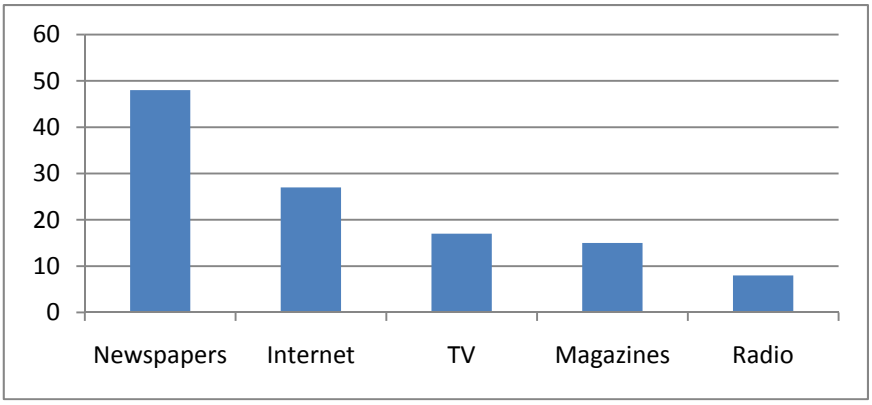
As stated earlier, the idea of a common European Public Sphere is limited by a severe lack of truly European media outlets that operate on a Europe-wide scale and look at topics from a European perspective rather than from a national point of view. Given that transnational European elites are usually multilingual, it is true that key national publications such as *Le Monde*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or *El Pais* are also finding resonance also outside their respective home markets. A trend that is even more pronounced for economic papers such as *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *Les Echos* or the *Handelsblatt*, yet for a mass audience, the scope of these publications is limited. The reasons are obvious: language barriers, as well as cultural differences and the traditional embedding in the nation state framework (cf. Kielmansegg 1996: 55) have met with limited interest and acceptance of large parts of the audience in member states. Despite the increasing transnationalisation of media corporations, their respective outlets almost exclusively remain bound to the national market and national audiences.

> "Media Products are mass products, and unfortunately the masses are no cosmopolitan-polyglot Europeans, but continue to be Swedes, Poles, Germans, French, Italians and Swiss. Even if the acquisition of languages has become compulsory in secondary school, the average girl will continue to watch her favourite chat show on German television and not on the *BBC*, and also Joe Bloggs, who spends his holidays twice a year in the European South, prefers his regional newspaper and does not read *Le Monde* or the *Financial Times*" (Ruß-Mohl 2000: 133f, *author's own translation*).

The few media projects that have exclusively focused on a European-wide mass audience have either not proved to be economically viable or have relied on

subsidies in order to guarantee their sustainability.[83] However, Schlesinger (1999), Chalaby (2002) and Brüggemann/Schulz-Forberg (2009) have drawn attention to a niche market for a highly specialised print media that cater for the information demands of a transnational European elite audience, composed of political and economic decision-makers, and do so mostly by using the *lingua franca* English: "It is noteworthy that in the key EU member states, especially France and Germany, economic elites are willing to read a newspaper written in English because of its international standing" (Schlesinger 1999: 272). The annual "business elite survey Europe" (BE Europe)[84] shows a clear preference of European decision-makers for the print media.

Figure IV.2: "Most reliable source business news" (Percentage)



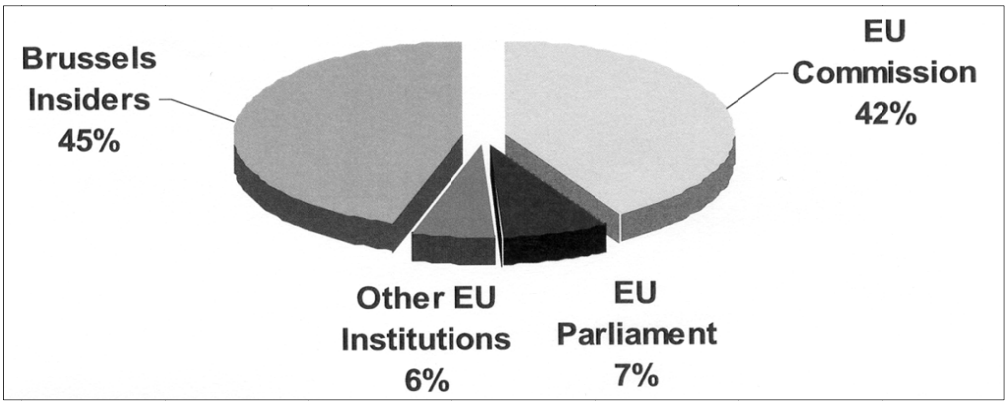
Source: BE Europe 2009

[83] In 1990, the British Mirror Group launched "The European" which however was suspended in 1998 due to disappointing sales figures. "Europa-TV", established by a consortium of European public service channels in 1985, already closed down one year later due to limited financial support and low acceptance of viewers. Special interest programmes such as "Eurosport", "Euronews" or the German-French coproduction "ARTE" have either confined their programmes to special interest sections or appeal to a "high culture" audience (cf. Holtz-Bacha 2006: 77-83, Rüggeberg 1998, Rothenberger 2008).

[84] The BE Europe Survey (formerly European Business Readership Survey, EBRS) carried out by the marketing research institute Ipsos, consists of a sample out of 455947 European top managers who work for companies based in Europe

The *Financial Times (FT)*, according to the same survey, is widely regarded as "the most important business read", followed by the *Economist* and the *Harvard Business Review* (cf. BE Europe 2009). The Financial Times has retained this position for the past 20 years and, among senior business readers, even exceeds its national competitors such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (cf. Schlesinger 1999: 272). An even narrower scope on Brussels policy making is provided by the *European Voice*, itself a weekly spin-off of the *Economist*. The paper is targeted at "all of the top people in the Brussels micro-polity" (Schlesinger 1999: 273). The European Voice with a circulation of merely 18000 copies (cf. www.european voice.com) sells itself as "the premier news source for Europe's most important and influential decision-makers", "leaders with the authority to act, power to influence the policy making" and "high level professionals for whom current knowledge and insight are essential" (www.europeanvoice.com). Already indicating the micro-sphere level, its distribution is limited to "all the main European Institutions in Brussels and abroad, paid subscribers worldwide, newsstands in Brussels, London, Strasbourg and Luxembourg, as well as passengers of several airlines, Eurostar Rail, and business hotels in Brussels" (www.european-voice.com). The *European Voice* states on its website that the majority of readers are recruited from the institutions themselves while the rest are labelled "Brussels insiders" (cf. Figure IV.3).

Figure IV.3: "Audited readership" *European Voice*



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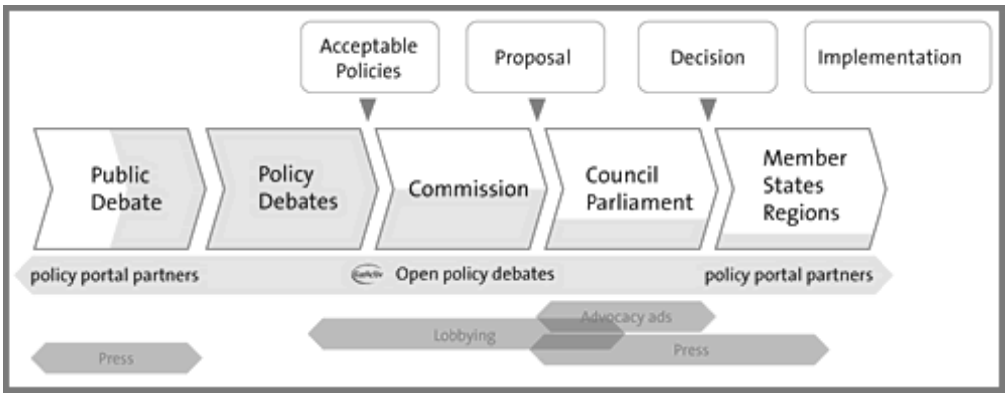
The *European Voice* is the European version of the US American *Roll Call*, another special interest publication of the *Economist* group, mainly targeted at U.S. congress members and with a similar circulation figure to its European sister.

As for the web-based media, the online service *EurActiv.com* has established itself as "the favourite online platform for Brussels and national professionals in EU policies", it "is at the heart of the 'Community of EU Actors'. This 'Community' includes several thousand European organisations and companies, many of which are currently using EurActiv's services", EurActiv's self-declared aim thereby being to "open the EU policy debate" both "within and outside the institutions" (www.euractiv.com). The service is used by civil servants in the institutions, as well as lobbyists and interest groups, it thus provides a major source of information in the policy-making cycle.

Figure IV.4: Information provision by *EurActiv* within the Policy Cycle



Source: www.EurActiv.com

The audiovisual sector, despite the emergence of *Euronews*, has generally not kept pace with the elite print media. Pan-European television has either focused in specific segments or has adopted a localisation strategy (cf. Chalaby 2002). Not only on the transnational level, but also on the domestic level there is a lack of

presence felt with regard to European topics in the national electronic media (cf. Duhamel 2000, Basnée 2003). Perhaps even more striking is the lack of top-level European politicians on national television which subsequently results in a lack of perception of prominent European players – while all citizens can recognise their Head of State, only a few manage to identify the President of the Commission or even the President of the Parliament (cf. de Vreese 2003: 5). Examining the TV coverage on European issues, the drastic conclusion is that "in terms of its officials, the EU is faceless. Given the power of an institution such as the European Commission, it is amazing how absent its officials were in television coverage of EU affairs" (Peter/de Vreese 2004: 17). This result has been confirmed by studies on EU coverage in Germany and the UK which have shown that most EU news items appear in newspapers and not in television newscasts (cf. Hahn/Leppik/Lönnendonker 2006: 77, Golding/Oldfield 2006: 137). Regarding the scope of EU political communication, this is a matter of concern as the majority of the European population (approximately 66%) indicate that they use the television as their preferred source of information when seeking information about the EU.[85] Accordingly, Gripsrud (2007) sees the television media as central for the emergence of a European public sphere, as well as the construction of a collective identity.

The Commission has recognised the importance of pictures by establishing the internal news agency and TV programme *Europe by Satellite* (*EBS*) which has been poised to fulfil a key function in this respect by boosting European leaders' presence in the audiovisual media (cf. O'Donnell 2003). *EBS* supplies *Euronews*, but also the most prominent European TV stations via Eurovision with footage of European affairs and provides the EU-Commission with a tool to enhance the

[85] Those people who responded that they had used one or the other source to find information about the EU were then asked how they would prefer to receive information about the European Union. Once again, television (60%) was named as the preferred source (Eurobarometer 60, Nov 2003).

presence of European politics in the audiovisual media by a considerable degree.[86] But *EBS* has its limits as a picture service when, e.g. edited versions of press conferences, are not accepted by every TV station on the grounds that using pre-produced EU material is not in tune with their journalistic autonomy. One of the mayor clients of *EBS*, however, is *Euronews*.

In the audiovisual realm of EU reporting, *Euronews* is arguably the closest approximation to a pan-European news service. Established in 1993 by a conglomerate of EBU stations and supported with additional funding by the European Commission, it is widely regarded as an example of a European media outlet with a Europeanised coverage, but subject however to the same complexities as multilevel European politics themselves. Yet the example of *Euronews* reveals some technical problems that act as barriers to European audiovisual media outlets in general: as *Euronews* provides programmes in eight different languages, the company has made a conscious choice of not using news presenters because of problems with lip synchronisation, with the inevitable result that a pan-European programme of this type appears less personal and colourful in comparison to one-language programmes such as *CNN* or *BBC World* where anchors and commentators play a major role in presenting the news (cf. Meinhof 2001: 118f).

Apart from those matters of presentation, there is also a deeper, content-related dimension that distinguishes a transnational coverage from a national edition when presenting the European dimension of a local issue, there is often a lack of international understanding of such issues, so that depending on the country, certain news issues need to be explained by sometimes rather

[86] *EBS* supplies particularly the acceding countries in Eastern Europe with comprehensive television footage free-of-charge. Major stations such as *CNN*, *CNBC* or *RAI* also regularly make use of *EBS* footage, because EBS, as the house broadcaster enjoys exclusive access to many events. *EBS* features no brand logo so that broadcasting stations can use the pictures with their own trademark.

cumbersome additional comments. In addition, national coverage can always depend on perception cues that are embedded in the national identity context. The "government" automatically means the country's "home" government, whereas in *Euronews* reports any government, parliament or committee always needs to be newly identified as the "Austrian", "British" or "European", thereby lacking the immediate discursive and identity context provided by the nation state (cf. Meinhof 2001: 118). Such linguistic details may seem negligible on first sight, but exert a considerable impact on the viewers' perception. According to Billig and his concept of "banal nationalism", it is precisely the often ignored linguistic dimension that constructs and confirms a recipient's discourse. The nation state, although increasingly shedding power to supranational organisations, still provides a continual background and point of reference for the political discourse of its citizen. It is a routine and familiar form of nationalism, so embedded into everyday life that it exerts a significant, if not consciously registered, impact on citizens' media reception (Billig 1995: 105ff). Euronews essentially lacks many of these "deictic centres"[87] that facilitate the everyday construction of identity by making reference to familiar symbols in the nation state. As Bourdon sums it up: "In short, it is almost impossible to get rid of the link between enunciation, reception and national identity" (Bourdon 2007: 275). Matters of reception seem to be at the core of the question of why EU topics seem to be underrepresented within the audiovisual media. In the following, the relationship between the EU's complex structure, the absence of referential "state-like" cues and media reception will be analysed more closely.

[87] Deixis, as a term in linguistics, refers to the phenomenon wherein understanding the meaning of certain words and phrases requires contextual information. A "deictic center" provides a set of references to that an expression, sound, or picture is "anchored" to. This also includes the discourse surrounding a phrase or relevant social factors (cf. Zubin/Hewitt 1995).

1.6 Conclusion: Complexity as the Key Factor in EU Communication

This chapter has listed some of the decisive context factors that affect the communication flows within the EU and between the EU and its member states. The common denominator of most of these factors is the high level of intrinsic complexity that characterises the European decision-making process, its sense of identity, its media landscape and therefore also its perception. Although the role of the EU's complex structure has been the subject of comment in the debate (cf. Koopmans/Pfetsch 2003: 9, Brüggemann 2008: 31ff), surprisingly few studies have followed through what impact this complexity really has on the means of communication and in particular on the perception of European audiences.

> "The transparency of political decision-making processes is not only measured against the information that is principally available, but also against the way in which this information offer is processed and transmitted by the mass media. An oversupply of information for which only limited processing capacity is available therefore leads to a situation of in-transparency of the political decision-making processes, because the complexity of decision-making procedures can no longer be followed by the general public. In addition, the information raw material coming from Europe often appears to be neither linguistically, nor with regard to content, sufficiently processed, so that its decoding becomes very laborious even for the interested recipient." (Trenz 2006: 18, *author's own translation*)

As shown, EU complexity levels differ considerably from the domestic setting with regard to historic evolution, action logics, structure, questions of identity and the media and it is in this context that perception patterns seem to play a key role. Looking, for instance, at the modest success of European parties in communicating their objectives to a European public, Wüst/Roth (cf. 2005: 75) observe that because of the European Union's intricate structure people fail to connect European decision-making to the knowledge acquired in domestic elections. Von Beyme (1994: 328, *author's own translation*) has noted that the "complexity of pluralistic multilevel decision-making – through the integration of

the three levels Europe, nation state, regional level made even more complicated – can hardly be reflected by the media."

The impact starts already at the level of news selection: Schulz has named "surprise" and „structure" as „dynamic" news values: simple key events with a surprise effect have a higher news value than complex affairs without surprise value (Schulz 1976: 33). The above described EU decision-making process, for instance, is marked by the fact that legislative acts undergo a number of amendments from the initial Commission proposal up to the act which is finally adopted by the Council and Parliament. The surprise value of the Commission presenting a proposal for a new directive is therefore inherently limited as the eventual outcome may significantly differ from that proposal and every statement with regard to the initial proposal comes with a caveat.[88] The EU's "facelessness" in terms of clearly identifiable top-ranking leaders has contributed to the fact that Europe is of comparatively limited interest to the mass media in terms of news value (cf. Brettschneider/Rettich 2005: 137).

While the limited news value of many EU policies may explain the low amount of EU coverage found in many content analysis based studies,[89] it

[88] To cite a prominent example: the presentation of the EU "service directive" by Commissioner Frits Bolkestein in 2005 triggered a wave a popular criticism for its allegedly "neo-liberal" stance. Yet the proposal was changed through a number of amendments in the European Parliament to such a degree that the committee *rapporteur* in charge claimed that it was "turned upside down" when finally adopted in 2006 (cf. htttp://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4717978.stm). Such profound changes of legislative proposals are rare in domestic settings where the initiator is usually backed by a majority in the legislative chamber.

[89] Studies have found marked differences with regard to the amount of EU-related content in the news media, ranging from just 5 per cent EU coverage (Eilders/Voltmer 2003) to more than 50 per cent (Trenz 2004) due to different operational designs and the media outlets analysed. Given these extremely heterogeneous findings, Neidhardt has criticised evidence for high or low Europeanisation of coverage as largely based on research "artefacts" (cf. Neidhardt 2006: 47). Questions of measuring between studies aside, independent over time analyses have shown a slow

however does not explain why higher levels of EU coverage have not automatically increased the perceived importance of European integration within the general public (cf. Peter 2003: 695). News values, however, are not only of importance with regard to journalistic selection criteria, but also affect the reception of news content by the audience (cf. Eilders 1997). As far as the coverage of EU topics is concerned, people receive information according to their "subjective picture of reality", i.e. relating information to categories "important – not important" and "interesting – not interesting" (cf. Früh 1994: 61).

Research in cognitive psychology has shown that the reception of complex issues is less the product of rational analysis, but more often guided by heuristic forms of opinion formation.[90] This has led a number of researchers to the conclusion that citizens' everyday media use and decision-making are not based on a rational basis, but more frequently follow heuristic judgements that allow for quick decisions with less cognitive effort (cf. Brosius 1995: 107f, Chen/Chaiken 1999: 74). This can happen, for instance, by using familiar "anchors", "cues" or "short-cuts". Faced with an abundance of information in the mass media, people develop mechanisms to reduce complexity in a way meaningful to them.[91] Information processing is thereby based on the concept of "cognitive miser": in the absence of familiar cues, the "cognitive cost" of dealing with lesser known subjects may exceed the intrinsic motivation to deal with a subject at all (cf. Fiske/Taylor 1991). Research indicates a strong correlation between knowledge,

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but steady increase in coverage over the past decades (e.g. Brüggemann et al. 2006, Lucht/Trefas 2006).

[90] The "heuristic-systematic-model" developed by Chen/Chaiken (1999) implies that the processing of information follows either a systematic route or a heuristic route. In the first case, it is assumed that individuals use media content in a conscious way and carefully reflect upon the information given whereas the heuristic mode of information processing reduces the complexity of information by resorting to existing processing routes (cf. Wirth/Matthes 2006: 343f).

[91] On the necessity of complexity reduction from a sociological perspective (cf. Luhman 1975: 26).

awareness and interest in a topic (cf. Inglehart 1977). Given the absence of strong news values, audience members avoid learning about EU issues and improving their knowledge on such topics. Low levels of knowledge, however, are likely to correspond with highly volatile and mood-dependent attitudes (Wirth/Matthes 2006). With regard to e.g. referenda on EU Treaties, these audience members may be more susceptible to second-order effects or emotional campaign messages.

As far as the role of reception for democratic will-formation is concerned, Taber sees individual perception at the core of this process: "the engines of public opinion are individual citizens as information processors" (Taber 2003: 435).[92] Apart from resorting to heuristic judgements under the conditions of high complexity, the reception of media content is in addition thought to be biased by preconceived "schemes", i.e. recipients are more likely to process information that is consistent with already existing knowledge patterns and more likely to give higher salience to arguments that are consistent with their own opinion (cf. Brosius 1995: 101ff, Kepplinger 1999: 82). Summing up the research in this field, citizens seem to have only a limited ability for the processing of political information.[93] From a democracy theoretical point of view, this fact has raised widespread concern about the "cognitive competence" (cf. Detjen 2000) of citizens: with regard to scientific evidence for the ideal of the responsible

[92] The link made between individual information processing and public opinion formation can also be seen as marking the distinction between "public opinion" and "published opinion" whereby the latter usually serves as the prime indicator in European Public Sphere related content analyses. Although links between public and published opinion can be established by combining content analysis with polls (e.g. de Vreese/Boomgarden 2006), such an enterprise becomes difficult when applied to routine coverage and over time analyses. It is therefore unclear to what extent the media coverage on European issues in fact reflects the public debate on these issues.

[93] Cf. Graber (1988) for schematic information processing, cf. Bennett (1986) and Bennett/Resnick (1990) for voter apathy, Delli Carpini/Keeter (1996) for the relationship between lack of interest and low levels of knowledge, and the Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe (2006) for knowledge about the EU institutions (cf. European Commission 2006a).

democratic citizen Wirth/Matthes (2006: 348) have come to the conclusion of an "empirical disillusionment", Taber (2003: 455) has wondered about the "the paradox of the dysfunctional citizen" and Kinder (1998: 785), not to mince matters, states that "the depth of ignorance demonstrated by modern mass publics can be quite breathtaking." [94] As far as realistic conceptions of the European Public Sphere are concerned, they need to take into account that the chain of selection processes does not end with the journalists but with individual reception (cf. Eilders/Wirth 1999: 37). Under the conditions of high complexity the gap between "published opinion" and "public opinion" can therefore be expected to be more pronounced in the European context than in a national: the lack of a familiar reference system on the European level that would facilitate the processing of EU-related information presents a "cognitive gap" (Reif 1993) between the domestic and European setting.[95]

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[94] Naturally, the debate about the citizens' inherent motivation and ability to participate in the democratic process goes back deeply into the history of political thought and is not least related to diverging normative concepts of "elite democracy" vs. "deliberative democracy" (for a "classic" overview cf. Scharpf 1970). This is also true regarding assumptions about the role of politics in people's everyday routine where politics merely play "a sideshow in the great circus of life" (Dahl 1961: 305). Lippman commented already in 1922 that the general detachment of many citizens from political issues leads to subjective assumptions that "often mislead(s) men in their dealings with the world outside" (Lippmann 1922: 18). On the other hand, Page/Shapiro (1992) as well as Zaller (1992) have shown for the U.S. that widespread public disinterest in political issues must not necessarily result in a dysfunctional public opinion as long as "elite cues" are sufficiently linked to public will formation which by all means can be "rational".

While the finer points of the debate on citizen participation and democracy, from normative as well as functional perspectives, have been discussed elsewhere and would exceed the scope of this study, it is however noteworthy how issues of perception and participation have been linked within the spheres of classic political theory and modern cognitive psychology throughout the years.

[95] The often cited argument that domestic political settings are equally complex when examined on the nitty-gritty level cannot be convincingly upheld, as it is the familiar reference system of the

Given the divide within the European media system into European elite media with comparatively frequent coverage on European issues and general public mass media with a comparatively low coverage and existing cognitive barriers in the audience, it is hardly surprising that Latzer/Saurwein (cf. 2006: 25) in a review of existing research have found an advanced fragmentation of audiences on the European level.[96] The more fragmented audiences become, the less specific topics receive the attention of a sufficiently large audience (cf. Marschall 1999: 123), thereby limiting the opportunities of the emergence of a "public" opinion that carries some weight. Whereas the fragmentation of topics and audiences is a process that already undermines the concept of an all-encompassing public sphere in which a majority of citizens can deliberate on the nation state level, this process has an even more pronounced effect on participation in a segmented European context (Latzer/Saurwein 2006: 25).

While the EU's complicated decision-making process and perceived lack of drama have been discussed in the context of low levels of news value, it has not been taken into account how this setting has 1. on the European level strengthened the emergence of a specialised transnational European media system and 2. in the national media environment has led to a fragmentation of audiences with regard to those recipients who readily and easily perceive EU-related media content in their national media and those who do not as a result of high motivational and cognitive perception thresholds. The implication for a European Public Sphere concept open to empirical review would be to take the reality of this segmentation into account

nation state that 1) allows for few but instantly recognisable actors, 2) a relatively clear attribution of responsibility in terms of government and opposition, 3) the top-down permeability of "elite cues" which subsequently offer simple but effective cognitive short-cuts also for uninvolved people and 4) an affective attachment through a comparatively strong national identity.

[96] Cognitive psychology has shown that the capacity for information processing can be significantly enhanced through practice (cf. Wessels 1990: 104). It can be therefore assumed that people who are deeply initiated in the EU context have acquired essentially different attention patterns with regard to EU-related coverage (cf. chapter IV. 2).

as judgements about a "communication deficit" may appear in a different light when applied to segmented audiences and explicitly distinguishing between specialised European media and general public media.

2. The European Public Sphere(s) – Expert Circles vs. General Public

Taking the above mentioned structural factors into account, in particular the complexity of power relations and the audience's perceptional barriers, the following paragraphs propose a reconsidered European Public Sphere framework as a basis for the empirical analysis of communication flows within the European communicative space.

A number of theoretical concepts have stressed the prominent role experts play in the European decision-making process: Trenz and Eder (cf. 2004: 8f) have observed the emergence of a transnational expert sphere, consisting of institutional actors, advisors and representatives of civil society. Benz (cf. 1997: 103-107) and Neidhardt (cf. 2006: 50) note the increasing importance and expansion of expert "negotiation arenas" that proceed political decision-making processes and Eising/Kohler-Koch (cf. 1999: 5f) draw attention to a process in which the focus shifts from classic interest accumulation towards an EU "network governance" between experts, civil servants and interest group representatives. These transnational expert networks tend to be specialised and issue-related and there is an obvious problem of communicating their output to a heterogeneous European mass audience (cf. Trenz 2002: 25). This is reflected by the aforementioned emergence of transnational media outlets such as the *Financial Times* and the *European Voice* which are targeted at a relatively small, but steadily growing circle of elites (cf. chapter IV.1.4). This group of people can be seen as constituting such a European Public Sphere *en miniature* or a

"transnational space" (Schlesinger 1999: 271, also cf. Schlesinger/Kevin 2000: 217).[97]

Against the backdrop of a fragmented public sphere (cf. Latzer/Saurwein 2006: 25) in which the "audience" as the decisive reference group of the public sphere actually constitutes a "socially amorphous group" whose actual degree of networks only becomes visible on the micro level (cf. Neidhardt 2006: 52), a theoretical European Public Sphere concept that distinguishes between specialised EU circles and a mass audience, seems viable in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the different roles this spheres may take in the European political system. Schlesinger has implicitly made this distinction when looking at the news production under the conditions of a segmented market for European news:

> "For analytical clarity, it is essential to distinguish between information made available to elites engaged in the policy process or economic decision-making and that produced for mass publics. The press is preferred by elites, whereas television is the most used mass medium. That said, however, television is now increasingly capable of finding niche markets prepared to pay for specific services, as the growth of digital technology is ensuring that this medium, too, will be capable of targeting elites." (Schlesinger 1999: 271)

This approach is shared by Ruß-Mohl who suggests that an evaluation of the potential of European journalism demands an analytical distinction between a "high-quality, elite-targeting information journalism and information appealing to the masses" (Ruß-Mohl 2000: 132, *author's own translation*).

The challenge is to reflect this distinction within a broader theoretical framework. If the European public is segmented, broadly speaking, into expert circles and general public, these two groups could subsequently be distinguished by the *function* they have for the EU political system. Already in the 1990's, Eder

[97] As opposed to the general public, these people can also be assumed to be congruent with the small group of people who claim to have a "European identity" (cf. Kevin 2003).

et al. introduced the idea that, on a European level, there has been a development towards a "public" sphere that is different but *functionally equivalent* to a national public sphere. This sphere, in line with the assumptions made above, is characterised by a) a focus on specific issues, b) the fact that it is mainly targeted at experts and interest groups (i.e. a network of organised groups) and c) a debate that is designed along the lines of the EU decision-making process (Eder et al. 1998).

Who then forms part of these expert circles? Brüggemann notes that the EU system of governing is marked by the constant search for compromise and co-operation and therefore requires more communication efforts than a system with a central decision-making authority. Yet there is no agreement within political science research on how to define the exact scope of these policy networks (cf. Brüggemann 2008: 30). In a narrow understanding, they would be limited to an elite circle of mostly Brussels based politicians, lobbyists and interest groups and the sphere of "arcane" policy, i.e. a setting in which participants exclusively operate behind closed doors and with a prime emphasis on interpersonal communication. While this might be the case for some negotiations in the European Council (as in any other cabinet-based system of government) it does by no means reflect the policy-making process in the EU as a whole, including hundreds of committees ("comitolgy", cf. chapter IV.1.3), expert groups and a whole range of intermediary institutions. A broader definition could therefore follow the definition of policy networks by Pal (1997: 190) who refers to a network of all those actors who are involved in creation and implementation of "policies". Yet, with a view to the existence of "supranational deliberation" (cf. Eriksen 2000: 42), this expert sphere would, in a broader sense, have to include all those stakeholders in EU policy who are principally interested in the outcome of

EU decision-making and who consciously follow EU developments via the media.[98]

This expert sphere fulfils a basic and necessary function in the Brussels political process in that it mirrors the various social concerns (as represented e.g. by interest groups) and processes relevant input for decision-making. The continuous output of European legislation indicates that communication among experts apparently functions very smoothly. Despite a highly complex decision-making process and a large and heterogeneous number of actors involved, the EU has developed an efficient way of communicating with each other, deliberating the pros- and cons of certain European issues and reaching conclusions.[99] In the day-to-day jargon of "EU speak" these group of people is often referred to as the "Brussels bubble".[100]

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[98] Stakeholders must not necessarily be located within the EU: a fonds manager at a Zurich bank may base his investment strategies partly on decisions taken in the European Central Bank or the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (Ecofin) and therefore follows the respective media coverage. Academic researchers on EU affairs, as well as local politicians or NGOs, can have a vital professional interest in decisions taken at the EU level.

[99] The idea of distinguishing between two public sphere strands can be supported by the findings of Rucht (2000) who was able to demonstrate that social movement lobby groups have considerably intensified their lobby activities in Brussels while at the same time protest mobilisation directed to the European public did not increase. Ruß-Mohl (cf. 2000: 134f) has noted that compared to journalism in Europe, the public relations activities of multinational companies, supranational administrations, interest groups and NGOs have become "Europeanised" to a higher degree. Public opinion formation on a Europe-wide scale indeed lags behind economic integration (cf. Gerhards 2000: 299).

[100] "Inside the Brussels bubble" is for instance the name of a blog scrutinising the activities of lobbyists in the European capital (cf. http://brusselsbubble.blogspot.com/). There are several other blogs reflecting on the Brussels scene while referring to the picture of the "bubble". On the shared professional interest of this micro-sphere, one blogger notes: "The main thing I have learned is that, within the Brussels bubble, most information is available on an informal basis by anyone who is (professionally) working to get them. And if a direct contact does not know, he or she will have

In as much as such an expert sphere is able to fulfil one important systemic function of a classic public sphere, i.e. mirroring the different opinions and inputs and making them visible to decision-makers, it lacks another essential feature: it is not open to all citizens, i.e. the general public (cf. chaper III.2.1).[101] The normative critique that such a sphere is effectively limited to an "elite" and the EU therefore an "elite project" is acceptable, but has to be put into perspective: the argument equally applies to national governments and the substantial amount of decisions taken, for instance in the German Bundestag, without any public debate.[102]

There is however, a functional problem connected to this: the expert sphere with its limited scope has also only limited means of generating public support for the legitimisation of the political system as a whole. As shown previously, a minimum of at least "diffuse support" is necessary in order to maintain approval to the system as a whole (cf. chapter III.3). This approval is necessary condition for the internal cohesion of the Union, because diffuse support underlines a collective European identity strong enough to accept redistributive measures. The EU also relies on broad public support if it wants to develop further: by way of seeking public approval for new Treaties or further enlargement rounds. This can arguably only take place in the framework of a

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a contact that knows." (http://julienfrisch.blogspot.com/2009/10/in-brussels-bubble-2-informality-sphere.html). Yet the "Brussels bubble" also connotes a certain lifestyle dimension characterised by the conditions of living and working in an expat community which naturally intensifies contacts among international employees.

[101] Access to this sphere may principally be open to everyone (e.g. via specialised media outlets), but the aforementioned lack of information, knowledge and motivation effectively prevent most citizens from being involved in a meaningful European discourse.

[102] A point frequently stressed by advocates of deliberative models of democracy where direct participation of large parts of the public is seen as the desirable goal. However, it appears that is precisely the issue-driven negotiation process of the expert sphere that might provide the closest approximation to the deliberative ideal (cf. Eder et al. 1998: 336).

general Europe-wide debate among citizens and arguably only through the mass media (cf. Gerhards 2000: 300). In this respect, Neidhardt (2006: 52, *author's own translation*) states that "the relatively low degree of integration of the European Public Sphere infrastructure seems to be a clearly restrictive condition that constrains its actual potential for discourse."

Drawing on the insights of Eder/Kantner (2000), such a Europe-wide public sphere may already exist in the form of cross-national communication networks which emerge in response to some prominent topics such as the BSE scandal. The scope of this public sphere is, however, limited and suffers predominantly from structural and organisational barriers (e.g. different languages, different media systems) which prevent the media coverage from being as pronounced as in the national context. Nevertheless, as the examples mentioned have demonstrated, a transeuropean media coverage does exist, even on the same *qualitative* level, but there is a *quantitative* difference to national public spheres. The difference mainly lies in a higher degree of decentralisation and a generally looser network of interactions (cf. Neidhardt 2006: 52).

For the notion of the "communication deficit" the implications are twofold: it is in the communication with the European citizen that the deficit to communicate becomes obvious. As far as the expert sphere is concerned European communication however fulfils its tasks efficiently. Distinguishing between these two public sphere strands and *their audiences* is therefore an important step in order to make valid statements about the efficiency of EU political communication and the nature of political public relations in Brussels. Table IV.1 shows the two spheres and their distinguishing characteristics in comparison:

Table IV.1: Overview on the two Strands of EU Political Communication

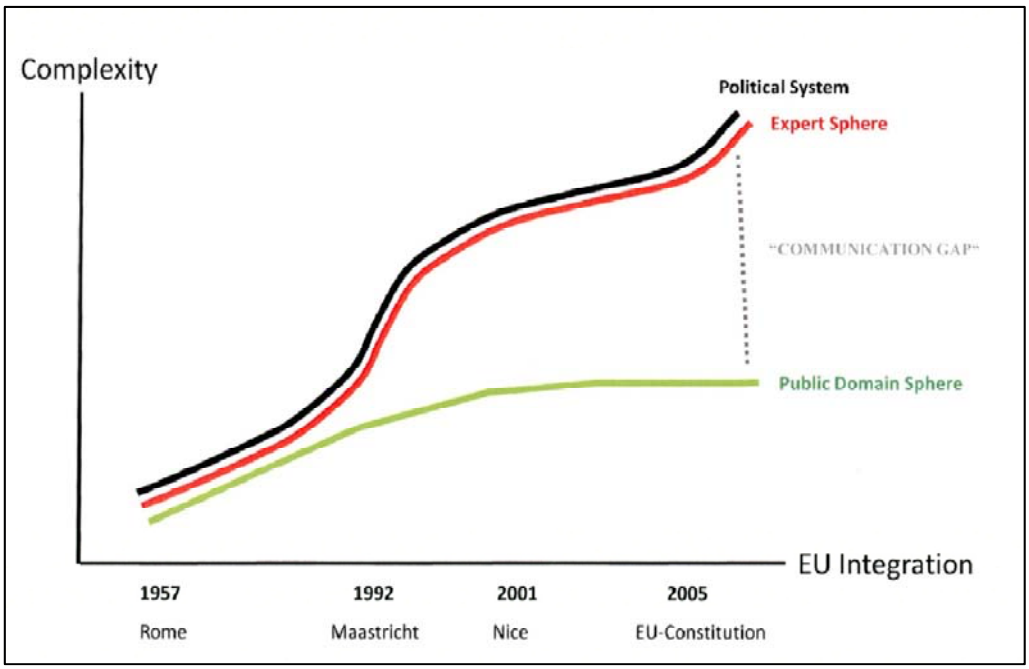
Segments	**EU Expert Sphere** = Specialised sphere that enables and promotes political discourse	**Public Domain Sphere** = European Public Sphere in an all-encompassing sense of participating citizens
Audience	Political decision-makers, interest groups, stakeholder ("Eurocrats") → high level of EU-related knowledge, multilingual and transnational media use	European citizenry → low level of EU-related knowledge, media use usually limited to national media and mother tongue
Form of Communication	Interpersonal communication networks, European media (e.g. *Financial Times*, *European Voice*, *EurAktiv*, specialised media and specific sections of national elite media (e.g. *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *Le Monde*, *El Pais*)	National media with general public orientation, in particular audiovisual media
Media Reception	Systematic information processing of EU coverage	Heuristic information processing of EU coverage
Function	Observation of societal groups and detection of relevant issues as subjects for the European decision-making process. Maintenance and increase of beneficial policy results (output legitimacy)	Legitimising the "European project" through the approval of European citizens. Continued existence and evolution of European Union requires at least the diffuse support of a majority of citizens (input legitimacy).

State of Play	Fulfils system requirements efficiently, 50 years of EU policy-making have led to the evolution of unique structures of political communication in Brussels that ensure the cooperation of political actors, interest groups and institutions, despite cultural and linguistic differences –developed–	Fulfils system requirements insufficiently, complexity of the EU framework and prevailing national journalistic cultures make it difficult to communicate positive EU output performances to the European public domain –underdeveloped–

3. The Task: Bridging the "Communication Gap"

If one accepts the idea of a functioning expert public sphere on the one hand and an underdeveloped public domain sphere on the other, one also has to take into account that the European Union as a whole has developed significantly since its creation in the 1950's in terms of member states, scope of influence and organisational complexity – features which naturally have had implications for the internal and external communication process. Drawing on the insights gained in the previous chapters, the relationship between the two spheres may be illustrated in a schematic graphic as outlined in figure IV.5.

Figure IV.5: The Relationship between Complexity and Audiences



The "communication gap" is the perceived discrepancy between the "real" (=functional) significance of the EU (high) in the policy-making process and its representation in the public domain (low). In order to theoretically classify the relationship between the two communicative strands and their impact on the objectives of European media relations, the following assumptions can be made:

In the early years of the European integration process, the "communication gap" did not act as a functional systemic barrier to the political process, because the EU political system – in the absence of referendum votes on new Treaties – did not necessarily depend on the explicit consent of the general European public. On the contrary, following the functionalist foundations of the EU integration

with its focus on output-legitimacy, the narrowed-down expert sphere aimed at the elite audience of specialised EU stakeholders, mirroring the logic of "issue-related cooperation between experts" (cf. chapter IV.1.1). The key objective was to provide comparative benefits to the member states in a limited number of economic sectors.

With the increasing influence and visibility of EU policy in the everyday life of European citizens the discrepancy between the importance of EU decisions and the lack of public communication has been perceived as increasingly negative ("invisible bureaucrats", "closed-door policy-making in Brussels", "EU governs over our heads") and as de-legitimising. Apart from the normative requirements of democratic participation, bridging or, at least reducing, this "communication gap" also appears *functionally* necessary in order to maintain public approval of the EU system as a whole. Approval can only be guaranteed if 1) the positive outputs of the EU system can be clearly attributed to its policy-making and therefore appear desirable in the eyes of the public (output-legitimacy) and 2) citizens' knowledge and interest about EU issues is improved to such a degree that meaningful participation is enabled and "diffuse support" is secured (input-legitimacy). For both objectives, public awareness needs to be created about how the EU functions and what it stands for, [103] notably by communication to a general public audience by way of those mass media that are most frequently consumed. "Trickle-down" effects from audience members consuming elite media are inherently limited because of distinctly different modes of information processing with regard to EU topics.

Yet, it might be precisely the implicit double-structure of expert audience on the one hand and general public audience on the other that has a reciprocal effect on the way political communication in the European institutions has been

[103] „The public sphere starts running and gathers momentum to the extent that Brussels and Strasburg are perceived as political centres" (Neidhardt/Koopmans/Pfetsch 2000: 288, *author's own transaltion*).

organised and how EU communicators operate. The following case-study was designed to find empirical evidence for these assumptions and the viability of a theoretical distinction between two largely separate public sphere strands when evaluation the nature of the European "communication deficit".

4. At the Centre of European Media Relations

With regard to the considerations and the theoretical framework developed above, the study takes a closer look at the European Union's media relations and the activities of its main actors, the Commission spokespersons. Within the EU institutional framework, the European Commission is effectively at the centre of EU communication activities in Brussels and acts as the principal player in the media relations process.[104] It has its own centralised Directorate General in charge of communication matters (DG COMM), which also comprises the Commission spokesperson service (SPP – Service du Porte-Parole). The spokesperson service is arguably the highest professionalised body of political communication experts in Brussels and occupies a special position within the Union's political communication process. Within the structure of DG COMM, the SPP forms a quasi-autonomous body: it consists of 27 spokespersons who act as the main communicators for the 26 Commissioners and their portfolios, and the

[104] The Council, in comparison, features only a small press service with few staff. Important communication work is usually carried out by national spokespersons who either travel with their ministers from the member states or simply communicate messages about the outcome of the meetings at home to the national press. Council media communication in Brussels is mostly limited to symbolic meetings (cf. Meyer 2004: 138). The European Parliament has a small centralised communication unit for general, non-partisan, information work. Due to the political nature of the Parliament, the communication is dominated by the communication experts of the different political groups, parties or members of the European Parliament.

"spokesperson of the Commission" who acts as the Commission President's spokesperson in a *primus inter pares* capacity.

In addition, there is a strategic planning unit with a team of 9 additional specialists to support the Commission President in his media relations. Every morning, the spokespersons and the heads of delegations in the member states synchronise their communication activities in a joint video conference, the "10 o'clock meeting". Decisions taken in this meeting have a direct influence on the "message of the day" and the midday briefing. The daily midday press briefing ("12 o'clock meeting"/"Rendez-vous de midi") itself is the institutionalised meeting point for the information exchange between the spokespersons and media representatives. The 12 o'clock meeting effectively sets the Brussels agenda and also serves as an informal meeting place of the Brussels press corps where story lines are discussed and inside information is exchanged among journalists themselves (cf. Raeymaeckers et al. 2007: 111). In contrast to governments in most member states, the Commission spokespersons also frequently take on tasks such as statements on television that – in a national setting – would usually be performed by the politician him- or herself.

The fact that this relatively small body of only 27 spokespersons acts as a gateway in the communicative exchange between EU institutions and the more than 1000 correspondents in Brussels makes it a prime object for the analysis of the political communication flow in Brussels. Commission spokespersons deal with typical EU communication phenomena such as the "blame game" on a daily basis. They are familiar with the response of journalists to their communication efforts and follow through the process from the information exchange to the finished "product" of the media, thereby evaluating the "success rate" and framing of EU topics in different media outlets. Research on the work of Brussels correspondents has shown that the actions of spokespersons exert a significant influence with regard to which media outlets or which type of media are provided with decisive information.

> "In my personal experience, a lot depends on the spokesperson. There are spokespersons who, for instance, perceive the big daily newspapers as their most important clients. And they attach a particular importance to briefing these because they want a certain coverage the next day. There are spokespersons who regard news agencies as very important and provide them with information because they are aware of the scope and agenda-setting function particularly in such a small time frame. Then, there are those for whom the most important thing is that their people look good on television und they particularly care about having some statements for TV – I think all this depends a lot on the communication strategy of individual governments, but, according to my personal impression, also from individual actors from the political side." (cf. Huber 2007: 36)

The spokespersons' actions, operating in the framework of the institutions and the specific constraints of impartiality, implicitly reveal much about the imposing influence of the special EU-setting. Nationality, party membership and personality of the respective commissioner determine his or her spokesperson's scope for action – as do the nationalities of the various Brussels correspondents.

5. Spokespersons and Journalists: A Theoretical Model of Interaction

The media coverage of EU affairs must be comprehended as the result of a mixed influence of the circumstances under which political public relations and political journalism emerge (cf. Esser/Spanier 2005: 37). The previous chapters indicate that political communication in the European Union differs from a national setting in that it has to account for the multilevel logic of supranational entity and national entity, i.e. spheres that have potentially diverse demands for information. To effectively locate the various structural, organisational and individual influences, the challenge is to develop a general model that systematically places the various influences in their context in order to offer a more comprehensive insight into how communication is generated in the European context.

Which factors influence EU media relations? The field of journalism research analyses the factors that influence the self-perception and actions of journalists and their occupational environment. The starting point forms the assumption that the journalism of each country and respectively the media as a whole are influenced by the general social environment, economic pressures and the professional and ethical standards of the actors (cf. Esser 1998: 21). There have been several attempts to identify these factors, like those of Shoemaker/Reese (1991: 54) in their "hierarchy of influence" model and Weischenberg (1992: 68) in his systems theory related "onion model". Both approaches emphasise the multi-layered nature of the process that eventually finds its result in a certain coverage. With regard to political communication, aspects of the power relations between the media and politics play an important role in this process as they greatly influence the way in which journalists operate. Given the interdependent nature of the media – politics relationship, simple interpretations of political effects on the media (e.g. successful placement of issues on the media agenda, favourable coverage) or of media effects on politics (e.g. the media's influence during election campaigns) are to be regarded with caution. The two entities are so intertwined that it appears preferable to study their mutual influence with regard to the complexity of their social interactions.

This complexity can hardly be grasped within a single theory. It is therefore suggested that the analysis of the politics-media relationship should be subjected to different theoretical approaches operating on different theoretical levels. Systems theory, (new-)institutionalism, and action theory have all offered fruitful insights in the nature of the relations between politics and the media i.e. spokespersons and journalists respectively. As the sum of their findings allows for a more differentiated view on interdependency relations, a multilevel approach will be advocated in the following allowing for a multi-layered analysis of the spokesperson – journalist relationship and the preconditions for the coverage on

EU topics. The different macro/meso/micro approaches which describe this realm from changing perspectives will be briefly outlined in the following.

5.1 Action Theory Perspective

Action theory has been, by and large, dominated by two diverging models: the actor as *homo sociologicus* and the actor as *homo oeconomicus*. While the first model attempts to explain human actions as the result of social norms and orientations, the latter assumes a profit-maximising rational choice logic underlying the actions of every individual.

In between these two poles, sociologists have increasingly argued in favour of an interdisciplinary model, the "sociologised homo oeconomicus" (cf. Schimank 2000: 72). Particularly when individuals find themselves in an interaction process, a strictly monological profit-maximisation approach must be supplemented by a social dimension, a fact that is aptly described by Coleman (1990: 29) who states that "actors are not fully in control of the activities that can satisfy their interests, but find some of those activities partially or wholly under the control of others." This approach is particularly interesting with regard to the spokesperson – journalist relationship as it accounts for the interdependent nature of their social interacting which is subjected to both social norms and rational choice. When confronted with other actors, the *homo oeconomicus* responds with a strategically calculating attitude. He observes his counterparts with regard to how their actions are influencing his own objectives and tries to find out how he could possibly influence the others and which means he has at his disposal in order to do so (cf. Schimank 2000: 82). Indeed, action often seems to be based more on identifying the normatively appropriate behaviour than on calculating the return expected from alternative choices (cf. March/Olson 1989: 22). Given the co-influence of the social dimension (e.g. the actor's awareness of possible social sanctions in the event of the neglect of social norms) and the aim of individual

profit–maximisation (e.g. the pursuit of personal objectives), the *homo sociologicus* and *homo oeconomicus* can be combined within a model that regards human beings as resourceful, restricted, expecting, evaluating, and maximising (cf. Esser 1993: 238, Lindenberg 1985: 100f).

The shortcomings of action theory as outlined above are obvious: how, for instance, can macro-sociological phenomena such as the modernisation process in politics and the media be aptly described from an action perspective? Are there any non-visible, i.e. empirically intangible, social conditions underlying the behaviour of actors? To answer these questions, a structural macro-perspective is needed.

5.2 Systems Theory Perspective

The principle of a functionally differentiated society, as represented by Luhmann's functional-structural systems theory, has become a central feature in the concept of the media as an independent actor. According to this macro theoretical view, the media can be seen as an independent social system which operates autonomously and self-referentially dissociated from other systems such as the political system (cf. Luhmann 2000: 8, Swanson/Mancini 1996: 11). As described earlier, the media system is specified through its function, the ability to generate publicity for certain topics (cf. chapter III.2.2). An important conclusion that follows from this assumption consists of the fact that journalism does not offer a description of real phenomena, but actively constructs "reality" (cf. Weischenberg 1992: 60).

A disadvantage of a purely systemic approach to political communication is the high level of abstraction which does not account for the influence of key individuals, specific media products or organisational aspects of the newsroom. Particularly Luhmann's functional-structural approach has been criticised because of its radical denial of the role of actors and the intangible nature of its hypotheses

which elude any empirical testing.[105] To overcome these difficulties i.e. taking into account the roles of individuals and their social environment, various scholars have subsequently tried to integrate system theory with action theory. What is common to most of these approaches is that the concept of system theory is re-conceptualised from an action theory perspective i.e. the idea that every actor acts according to the assumption that there is a system which influences his actions and the actions of others by offering general orientations. In doing so, the notion of a system helps to reduce the overwhelming complexity that is inherent in all social action (cf. Schimank 1992: 169).

Gerhards, for instance, regards the actions of individuals as tied to certain "constraints". Individuals within systems do not act freely but within limitations i.e. restrictions under which individuals make their decisions and choices. A specific class of constraints can be understood as "systemic constraints" which have evolved historically and condition the choices of every actor in a respective system. In accordance with a rational choice logic, actors choose within the systemic constraints those actions by which they will reach their specific goals most efficiently (cf. Gerhards 1994: 79ff, also Schimank 1992: 169).[106]

Druwe/Görlitz (1992) have conceptualised social systems as the result of individuals and their actions or, in short, a system can be understood as a sum of actions. In addition, social systems are marked by a specific structure arising from their respective system rationality. Although systems are by definition autonomous, media system and political system are not isolated from each other

[105] Luhmann regards the central principle of "communication" as not tied to physical actors. As "psychic systems" actors merely form the environmental conditions for the emergence of communication.

[106] As Scholl/Weischenberg remark (cf. 1998:155), Gerhards does not specify the nature of these constraints further. They could either consist in macro-level systemic constraints or meso-level institutional constraints or both.

but "structurally linked" by realms of interaction.[107] The relation between such linked systems e.g. the degree to which one system is able to "direct" the other is thereby not deterministic but interdependent; the relation is in fact such that a system can deliver a stimulus to another system ("perturbation" or "irritation") but whether this stimulus will be received and processed or how it will be processed by this other system depends on its structure. According to these assumptions, a direct influence in the sense of a hierarchical directing process cannot take place as the processing of every stimulus is subjected to an autonomous system logic that evades external determination (cf. Burth 1999: 291). As the structures of the respective systems determine the set of choices of the respective actors, they also greatly influence the realm of interaction. Knowledge of these structures is inevitable in order to understand the interaction process (cf. Druwe/Görlitz 1992: 154f).

5.3 Institutional Perspective

Compared to the two main sociological approaches action theory and systems theory, the institutional approach acquires a somewhat analytically awkward position in the in between (cf. Schimank 1996: 245). However, this approach offers fruitful insights into the way actors are influenced by the institutional structure of their social environment. The institutional perspective also fits in with the above outlined theoretical assumptions, as institutions themselves can be

[107] The meaning of the term "structural linkage" differs quite considerably within social science research: Druwe/Görlitz's usage of the term refers to the sum of interactions between political and media actors whereas Luhmann's concept, because of its denial of actors, regards the two systems linked via the theoretical construct of "public opinion". Scholl/Weischenberg, in a further twist, understand "structural linkage" internally as the linkage between the cognitive system of the individual journalist with the social dimension of the journalism/media system. To avoid misunderstandings, the model refers to Druwe/Görlitz's interaction-centred interpretation.

understood as the deeply-layered practices constitutive of social systems, structures that simultaneously shape and perpetuate the actions within a system (cf. Giddens 1979: 65). Institutionalism is thereby not limited to the study of formal mechanisms but analyses how institutions work in practice, recognising the central part of unquestioned forms, structures, and routines (cf. Cook 1998: 14). Institutions include both formal structures and informal procedures that structure the conduct of actors. They channel decision-making and shape subsequent individual, societal, and governmental actions. In short: they provide a framework through which human beings interact. The media, in this respect, provide a persisting framework by which and within which political actors operate (cf. Sparrow 1999: 9f).

> "As an institution, the news media constrain the choice sets of these other political actors; that is, they structure – that is, guide and limit – the actions of those working in the three formal branches of government, in public administration, and at various stages or parts of the political process." (Sparrow 1999: 10)

To understand the interplay between both domains, Cook suggests that it is preferable to study firstly the news media's interactions with political actors, including the perspectives from both the political and the journalistic spheres in the process, and, secondly, the effects that those interactions and negotiations have on the kind of news that appears and the kind of policies and politics that are thereby encouraged (cf. Cook 1998: 13).

The relationship of the news media to governmental bodies such as the European Commission needs to be anchored in the discrete actions of the journalists and organisational executives who gather, select, edit, publicise, and sell political information. For the purpose of this study, this understanding is vital, as spokespersons are constrained in their actions by the demands of journalists and vice versa.

5.4 Integrated Approaches

With reference to the prevailing macro-, meso-, and micro-theories, Schimank observes that although they have each led to important insights in their field, the degree of explanation for interaction processes (in this case the relationship between the media, politics and the respective actors, i.e. spokespersons and journalists) is limited, as the complexity of interaction is only partly accounted for. It is therefore suggested that the spokesperson – journalist relationship can best be examined by using a theoretical approach that predominantly examines the micro level open to empirical observation, but which implicitly accounts for the institutional level and systemic macro level via role perceptions of actors. This concept is in line with Schimank's assumption that all actions take place in a structural context consisting of three dimensions: social systems, institutional norms and actor constellations. Each of these dimensions can be analysed with regard to the way they influence the actions of individuals (cf. Schimank 1992: 165). On the other hand, systems, institutions and actor constellations are permanently reproduced by the actions and interactions of individuals (cf. Schimank 1996: 247). As outlined, structural systems theory approaches in their strict interpretation are theoretically incompatible with actor-centred approaches.[108] However, this strict interpretation has the major disadvantage of throwing the insights of prominent branches of research entirely overboard. The application of systems theory in communication science, as proposed by Scholl/Weischenberg (cf. 1998: 164), should therefore be more practically understood as a supertheory under the mantle of which other approaches can find their own place (also cf. Blumler/Gurevitch 1995: 12). This would in addition

[108] Rühl, applying Luhmann's functional structural framework for communication research, criticises a methodological approach in which individual role perceptions do not fit in with a systems concept where individuals are not regarded as part of the system. In addition, Rühl (cf. 1980: 51) sees many social aspects of journalism neglected because these cannot be grasped from a "within perspective".

allow for a theoretical embedding of the interaction process between spokespersons and journalists.

Drawing from the insights of earlier chapters, a model for analysis that describes the interaction process of journalists and political communication professionals *and* in addition accounts for the segmentation of audiences into "experts" and "general public" should include the following assumptions:

● Political system and media system form autonomous systems which are structurally linked. There are, however, diverging opinions with regard to the degree of linkage: Jarren/Meier (2002: 128), for instance, argue that the media as social institutions have become increasingly "de-linked" from the political system, a fact that for instance can be inferred from the media's increasing orientation on market targets and their declining interest in socially or politically valuable responsibilities. Cook (cf. 1998: 3) on the other hand sees room for the view that the relations between media and politics have become more closely interwoven because of the high degree in which the work of newspersons is intertwined with the work of the official government. He argues that the news media have become an intermediary political institution to the extent that they even perform governmental tasks. From a systemic point of view, this ambiguity might be explained by observing that although both systems operate autonomously, the functional differentiation of specific systems simultaneously promotes increasing links between those systems. In short, differentiation increases the autonomy and interdependence of systems at the same time (cf. Gerhards 1994: 83).

● The specific needs and demands of each system have led to the evolution of connecting subsystems in order to meet the functional demands of the superordinate system. In this context, political journalism and political public relations can be understood as subsystems which link the political with the media system (cf. Bentele et al. 1997: 241, Bentele 2005: 211). Both subsystems "touch"

each other when journalists and PR professionals interact at the permeable borders of both institutions (cf. Löffelholz 1997: 190f). In the present case, the realms "governmental PR" and "political journalism" are regarded as forming those subsystems which are subjected to institutional norms.[109] Following Gerhards (cf. 1994: 79ff) and Schimank (cf. 1996: 246), these subsystems can be understood as generalised orientations of actions on the institutional meso-level through which actors' substantial objectives and the means used to accomplish these objectives are externally defined. Political public relations try to legitimise the objectives of the political system by offering the media system a self-description (cf. Hoffjann 2001: 138). Spokespersons manage the interdependence between the media system and the political system by organising the communication process and mediating between the conflicting brand of system-logic (cf. Pfetsch 1998: 237). Political journalists on the other hand actively construct their own "reality" from these processes, they do so on the basis of rules that are inherent to the system (cf. Weischenberg 1992: 60). The relationship between political journalism and political public relations is thereby marked by changing processes of induction and adaptation.

- For the interaction between journalists and political communication professionals on the micro level, the following assumption can be established: within the constraints which define abstract objectives and which are determined by the system, those actions are chosen by the actors which allow them to accomplish their specific objectives most efficiently. Actors, however, are not to

[109] This assumption differs from Weischenberg's concept which sees the institutional level tied to the media organisation. "Political Journalism", understood as a subsystem, however, is perceived to have developed norms and routines of its own. The equation of "subsystem" and "institution" is analytically problematic; however, the subsystems are not to be understood in a strict autopoietic sense but as organisational structures on the intermediate level of analysis.

be understood as entirely rational in a strictly profit-maximising way, they also act according to social norms that can sometimes oppose the profit-maximisation principle in order to avoid social sanctions. In accordance with the institutional framework, the microlevel of interaction must also account for the routine practice and the roles that journalists and political actors occupy within their respective political and social systems. This means that the principle of explicit utility-maximisation must be complemented by taken-for-granted notions of the way things have always been done and the way they should be done, notions that do constrain but also enable the choices and interests of those operating within institutions.

Journalists' activities, for instance, are constrained but simultaneously enabled, if not constituted by, such an institutional framework (cf. Cook 1998: 14f). As March and Olson observe, institutions may also consist of the formal or informal rules and norms that individuals use in their daily existence. They follow a "logic of appropriateness" i.e. they do what they consider appropriate and expected of them. What is "appropriate" depends on the roles and behavioural patterns within which the persons are embedded (cf. March/Olson 1989: 22f).

● Despite the complex and interwoven relationship between journalists and spokespersons which can hardly be subjected to exact measurement, one can distinguish between roles, functions and expectations of both groups which can be subsequently examined and related to each other (cf. Donsbach et al. 1993: 20). Basic and empirically tangible factors in this process are the role perceptions of spokespersons. Via role perceptions, the actors' respective social systems exert their specific influence on the actors' activities. The professional role perception of spokespersons, for instance, as "information provider" or "public informer", is influenced by their specific functions towards the media and audiences. Although roles are created by their actors they stand principally independent of single individuals with regard to single social processes. From this perspective, roles

"mediate" between system and actor as the social systems' functional expectations are mirrored in the actors' role perception (cf. Jarren/Röttger 1999: 208). It is to be noted, however, that role perceptions do not necessarily result in according actions. Decisive in this context is rather the perceptions' *relevancy for actions* i.e. the probability that role perceptions lead to actions which are in direct accordance with these perceptions. This probability can be evaluated within an interview: internally by the spokesperson or externally by an observer. In addition, the relevancy for actions can be evaluated with regard to the *product of action*. In the present case, this would mean following through the process of how the internal role perceptions of spokespersons and journalists result in a coverage which can be externally observed (cf. Scholl/Weischenberg 1998: 162f).

5.5 A European Model of Media Relations

In the process of European political communication two camps can be distinguished: the political system and the media system. As an autonomous institutional player, the latter not only covers the activities of the former, but also influences the proceedings within the EU by way of its coverage. Each system is characterised by a considerable diversity and riven with its own internal conflicts and needs. This macro level of both systems is subjected to structural influences, i.e. the specific European conditions as outlined in chapter IV.1. The model suggests that the individual actions of spokespersons can adequately only be understood with reference to these structural preconditions, e.g. the EU system's high levels of complexity and transnationalisation processes in the media.

Located on the institutional meso-level, political public relations and political journalism are understood as forming largely interdependent subsystems.[110] The structure of the subsystems "political journalism" and

[110] Subsystems can be according to Münch (cf. 1992: 341f) understood as a means of "interpenetration" between two superordinate systems, adopting the logic of the respective mother

"political public relations" can be regarded as being formed by a set of institutional norms and routines. Their influence becomes visible when, for instance, journalists, in evaluating the newsworthiness of a story, follow the "logic of the trade", i.e. the habits and views of their colleagues or editorial routines. Audience expectations, of course, are an important underlying prerogative. These rules are followed even when it is not obviously in the strict self-interest of the person responsible to do so. The conformity to rules can be regarded as contractual, an implicit agreement to act appropriately in return for being treated appropriately (cf. March/Olson 1989: 22f).[111]

On the micro-level, there is the direct interaction between political communication professionals and journalists. Their relationship is divided into a *frontstage* and a *backstage* area. On the *frontstage*, media actors and political actors publicly display their independence and antagonism, it is the place where the adversarial component of the relationship is displayed. The *backstage* often remains a hidden dimension, including processes of which the public is mostly unaware because they are usually not part of the media coverage (cf. Esser 1999: 212). It is the place where political communication professionals and journalists collaborate and information is swapped for publicity or where preferential treatment of journalists by spokespersons takes place.[112]

As stated earlier, the different micro-, meso-, and macro-levels exert their influence via the role perceptions of both actors as the social systems' functional expectations are reflected in the journalists' and spokespersons' role perceptions.

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system but in addition including the logic of other systems. This "double-logic" of subsystems stands in contrast to the Luhmann's strict autopoiesis concept, yet Hoffjann (2001: 190, *author's own translation*) has remarked that, in contrast to the polemical discussion, when speaking about interpenetration "semantic differences might be bigger than the factual".

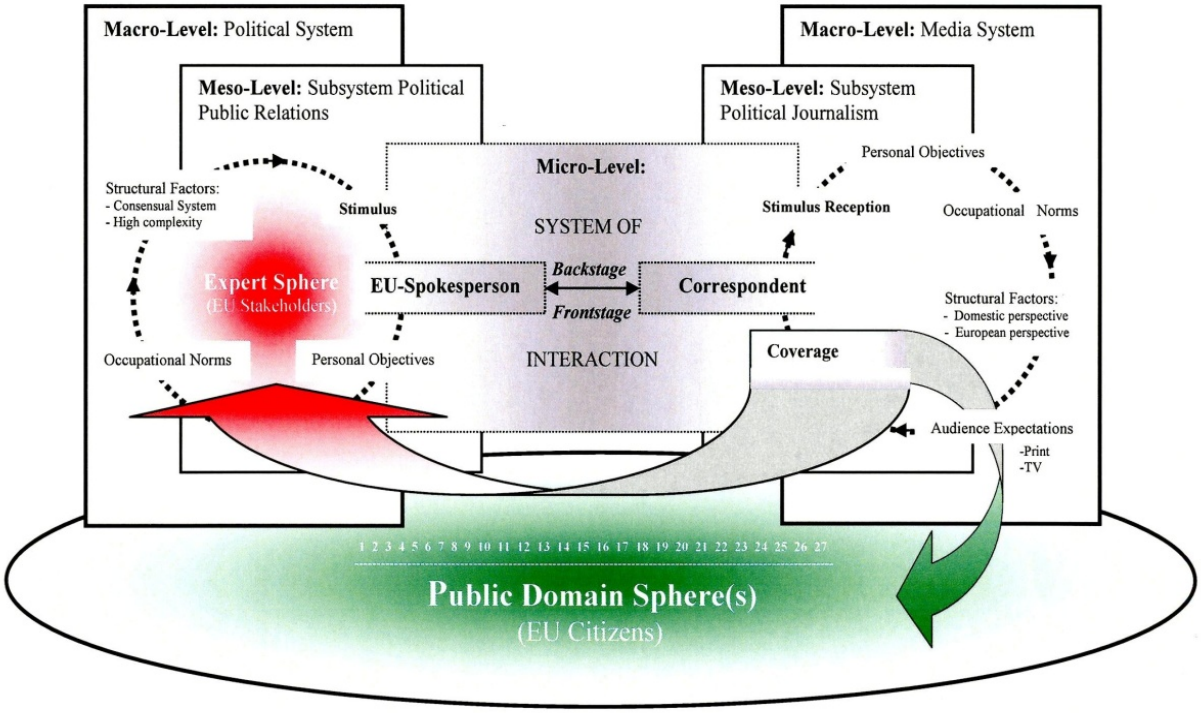
[111] In the words of a former White House spokesman:"You don't tell us how to stage the news and we don't tell you how to cover it" (cf. Cook 1998:15).

[112] These backstage manoeuvres, as "meta-discursive process news", increasingly become the subject of media coverage themselves (cf. Esser 2006).

Their roles can be regarded as a reflection of their respective social systems' functional expectations as well as their occupational norms. Political coverage on the whole must be seen as the product of the associated actions of journalists, politicians and their media advisers (cf. Jarren/Donges 2001: 16) and the system of interaction is the place where systemic and organisational constraints subsequently show their effects in the concrete actions of media advisers and journalists (cf. Jarren/Röttger 1999: 208). Hence, the system of interaction is the key to the understanding not only of the micro spokesperson–journalist relationship but also to the meso- and macro-dimension as it is also subjected to factors on those levels. Through the analysis of role perceptions which cannot be reduced to personally motivated objectives but are the product of occupational and social processes (cf. Scholl/Weischenberg 1998: 165), the system of interaction is open to the empirical observation of actions and roles. It also reflects a shared communication culture that has emerged between political communication professionals and journalists (cf. Blumler/Gurevitch 1959: 36).

As a visual representation of these theoretical assumptions, figure IV.6 presents a model of interaction that seeks to place the sphere of expert communication and the communication with the public domain in different realms within the political communication process in the European Union.

Figure IV.6: A two-way Flow of Communication



According to the considerations made about a conceptual distinction between "expert sphere" and "public domain sphere", the model assumes that large parts of coverage on EU affairs are targeted at a transnational and multilingual expert audience which is located in the immediate environment of the political system. This expert sphere is marked by a debate that reflects issues on a transnational, European dimension, thereby making use of specific "European media" such as the *Financial Times*, *European Voice*, *EurActiv*, but also specific sections of leading European broadsheets, such as *Le Monde*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or *El Pais*. The general public, in contrast, still predominantly discusses EU issues from a national perspective and by referring to national media outlets

and the audiovisual media in particular.[113] Because in the day-to-day decision-making process of the European Union, the public domain sphere effectively takes an observer role outside the immediate decision-making process and is therefore located outside the direct policy cycle.[114]

[113] The broadsheets mentioned are in fact national media outlets, but because of their standing as opinion-leading papers have an international appeal and are consumed not only in their country of origin (cf. chapter IV.1.5).

[114] The expert sphere, as an intermediary system, provides a link to the political system. However this does not necessarily imply that it is perceived by the public domain as doing so: European parties, interest representations and NGOs often find themselves at the fringes of public perception.

V Case-Study: The EU-Commission Spokesperson Service

1. Research Interest: Media Relations and the "Communication Deficit"

The objective of this analysis is to detect those factors that are specific to the EU multilevel system and that have a direct impact on the work of EU spokespersons and essentially distinguish their work from that of their counterparts in national governments and subsequently exert a significant influence on EU coverage.[115] According to the theoretical model, it is firstly expected that the institutional setting of the European Union favours a preference for the „expert sphere" (in relation to a national setting) and therefore a „technocratic" style of coverage – reflected by an orientation of spokespersons towards specialised media outlets. Secondly, the media relations process is assumed to be inherently designed to serve the complex information processing print media and therefore tends to neglect the audiovisual coverage dealing with "simpler" content, thereby widening the gap between "experts" and "general public".

2. Methodology

Research on EU institutions generally carries the danger of "losing itself" in the structural complexity of the EU system. Apart from incorporating the main theoretical strands of European Public Sphere research, the challenge is to conduct a research design that, on the one hand, has a broad enough scope to account for the different systemic, organisational and professional influences, all of which

[115] The study however draws no explicit comparison in that it includes the views of national governmental spokespersons. A sample that would adequately reflect the communication cultures of 27 member states would have exceeded the scope of the analysis. References to the work of national spokespersons were therefore made from the point of view of EU-spokespersons and on the basis of their professional insights with regard to the different national settings they encounter in their day-to-day work.

shape the political communication process, and that, on the other hand, is focussed enough to exhaustively examine a specific part of the communication process, with implications general enough to allow for valid statements on the nature of the EU communication process.

Empirical descriptions of the interaction between governmental information providers and media actors are generally prone to three methods of research: interview, observation and content analysis whereby the most prominent tool used in the research of routine practices remains the interview (cf. Scholl/Weischenberg 1998: 55).[116] For the topic under study, a "mixed method" approach, a combination of preceding observation and semi-structured expert interviews, appeared to offer the most fruitful insights as they enable to cover the role perceptions of the actors to be covered from an internal perspective (spokespersons' responses) and from an external point of view (observation).[117]

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[116] Content analyses of newspaper articles or TV reports with regard to EU affairs, much as they have contributed to the quantitative analysis of media reports, offer only limited insights with regard to the detection of specific underlying motivations and structures that trigger such a coverage. The findings of content analysis based studies were however viable in many other respects and supplemented the qualitative findings of the study: content analyses results that found a different salience and space given to EU affairs in audiovisual coverage/tabloid media vs. broadsheet print media were for instance seen as an indicator for a different treatment of EU content by different media outlets.

[117] The author consciously refrains from entering the trenches of the debate between "quantitative" and "qualitative" research paradigms, for an overview on the different epistemological and philosophical positions cf. Becker (1996). Following Bauer/Gaskell's (cf. 2000: 338) view that qualitative and quantitative methods distinguish themselves more by their degree of formalisation and standardisation rather than by the juxtaposition of "words" and "numbers", the two approaches constitute complementary research tools instead of competing schools of thought. Similarly, Mayring (cf. 2007: 19) points out that the constitution of categories in quantitative content analysis are based on previous qualitative considerations and assumptions. The criterion for choosing this particular research approach was based on its *appropriateness to the object under study* (cf. Flick 2009: 53). In the context of the persisting variety of theoretical standpoints within qualitative

With regard to the objective of evoking individual role perceptions, attitudes and rationales for action, semi-structured interviews allow for an immediacy that is usually not permitted by classic survey design questionnaires. Given the theoretic context of the study, the interviewing of individuals has an inherent limitation as it means reducing the observation of the respective systems and subsystems to a self-description of the individual actors. Yet, based on the assumption that role perceptions serve as a link between the individual actors and their occupational and social environment, it is reasonable to assume that interviewees do not solely relate their responses to their individual problems but place them in a wider context (cf. Scholl/Weischenberg 1998: 55f). Their role description can refer to the personal (the individual spokesperson him-or herself), the institutional (the SPP as a professional organisation) or systemic level (the EU and its member states).

It may be important to note in this respect that the Commission acts according to the principle of collegiality, i.e. decisions are taken under the authority of the Commission as a whole and not just a single Commissioner (cf. Gerhards 1993: 103). Spokespersons, in their work routines, invariably act with reference to this principle, and also need to take into account the positions of the European Council and the European Parliament. In the same way as their respective commissioners, spokespersons officially act under the commitment to be impartial and not attached to certain national interests.[118] In doing so, the spokespersons' actions not only reflect the variety of constraints and conditions in

research, the semi-structured interview technique used in this study is understood as a "pragmatic" qualitative method interested in the detection of recurring social phenomena in the empirical social science tradition of Weber, Lazarsfeld and Lewin. The theoretical underpinning is thereby based on the "Grounded Theory" and the principle of theory-based coding as opposed to the exegetic interpretation of texts in the tradition of objective hermeneutics (e.g. Oevermann et al. 1979).

[118] As a rule, spokespersons have to be of a different nationality than that of their respective Commissioner.

the Commission, but also account for reference points from outside the Commission.

The interviews were preceded by a six month period of participatory observation that demanded long-term access to the spokesperson service in the European Commission in order to survey also those actions that take place in a non-public setting.[119] In the present case, this applied for instance to the 10 o'clock strategy meeting to which access is limited to the SPP and a few additional members of DG COMM. The observation contributed to the study in two ways: firstly with regard to the formulation of research questions which were later incorporated into the design of the interview topic guide and secondly with regard to establishing the researcher's position as a "quasi expert" in the actual interview process (cf. Pfadenhauer 2009). As semi-structured interviewing allows for responses that are not limited by a highly standardised interview schedule, the technique promotes an active, open-ended dialogue making it the method of choice to reconstruct subjective theories of experts who have a complex stock of knowledge about the topic under study.[120] Questions about beliefs and attitudes are particularly affected by external factors such as social desirability (cf. Deacon et al. 1999: 72) and responses significantly depend on the status of the interviewer, i.e. his knowledge and perceived issue-related competence: the more the interviewer is able to demonstrate competent assessments, incorporate arguments and counter-arguments, the more experts are ready to "open up" and share insights in a "collegial" manner (cf. Trinczek 1995: 65). The preceding

[119] Observations of elite actors have proved to be a viable supplementary instrument in the context of examining communication structures in governmental organisations (e.g. Saxer 1992, Meyer 2002). The author had a placement as an internal producer of the European Commission's internal news agency *Europe by Satellite* from Oct 2003 – Apr 2004.

[120] A semi-standardization technique seems particularly apt with regard to reconstructing the underlying rational of elite actors because it is able to capture expert knowledge on the level of discursive awareness (Meuser/Nagel 2009: 51f).

participatory observation enabled the author to tackle the issue from an internal perspective and facilitated the detection of aspects that otherwise might have remained undetected (cf. Pfadenhauer 2009: 106). The in-depth knowledge gained during the observation also constituted an important safeguard against misinterpretations of informal remarks or responses. In all sections, the interviewer encouraged the interviewee to develop a response that touched upon the deeper aspects of the relationship between information provision, type of media and audience orientation by probing certain aspects that became obvious during the period of participatory observation.

All interviews were recorded in order to allow for the highest possible accuracy of representation. As all the interviewees were familiar with being on record by way of their professions, anxieties about recording the conversation did not pose a problem. The open-ended discussion was controlled with the help of a topic guide (cf. appendix). In this context, as most interviewees were integrated into the study not as representing individual cases but as representing a group, the range of potentially relevant information was restricted to a much higher degree than in interviews with a more explorative focus. Therefore the topic guide had a much stronger directive function with regard to excluding unproductive topics. The topic guide was structured along thematic sections and contains open questions as well as theory-guided, hypothesis-related questions (cf. Flick 2009: 203). The total number of questions was determined by the estimated duration of the interview, which was planned to last about an hour. The different sections referred to the day-to-day working practice of the individual spokesperson and designed to detect influences on the macro- (EU institutional structure), meso- (SPP and DG COMM organisational structure, peer-related effects), and micro-level (individual portfolio, personal convictions). Special attention was given to the treatment of written press and audiovisual media and the distinction between specialist media outlets and general publications and the discrepancies between a "Brussels bubble" insider audience and a "general public" audience. In order to

compensate for the weakness of semi-structured interviewing i.e. the more difficult comparability of different interviews, the topic guide was supplemented by two sheets containing rating scales with items referring to the importance of different types of journalists and factors that may act as a barrier to communicating to a general public audience. Respondents were asked to rate those items on a scale from 1-10 (1=does not apply at all, 10=applies fully)[121] and to briefly comment on their evaluation. In the final section, further inquiries were made with regard to the role of EU representations in the member states and how the communication process could generally be improved by inviting respondents to think freely about measures that would facilitate their daily work routine. This section was less designed to evoke criticism of the current setting, but rather to provoke a kind of wider reflection and brainstorming on the conditions provided for the work of a communication expert in an EU setting. The division of the topic guide into several sections served as a means to approach the communication flows from different angles, aiming to reflect a fuller picture of the complex relationship between spokespersons, journalists and their audience(s).

In total, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted from February to October 2008.[122] Respondents were chosen to reflect the SPP with regard to a

[121] The rating sheets with interviewees' individual ratings and additional comments can be found in the appendix.

[122] The sample comprised 15 spokespersons from the Barroso Commission (including the spokesperson of the Commission), 4 spokespersons of the preceding Prodi Commission and the Heads of Media from selected representations (cf. appendix). The views of the spokespersons of the Prodi Commission were particularly valuable in the pre-test phase, but also added a reflected perspective from a point of view detached from the immediate impact of current affairs. Similarly, time and resources only allowed for four representations to be visited, operating in the North, South, East and West of the EU and which were chosen as reflecting different journalistic cultures in Europe (cf. Hallin/Mancini 2004). The interviews in the representations were too limited in number to allow for generalisable statements on media relations activities in the member states, but nonetheless provided an important context for the better understanding of the work of the SPP

balance in portfolios (policy fields with a high degree of EU competence as well as those with a low degree of EU competence), nationalities, and duration of service. A pre-test was carried out in order to test the responsiveness to the questionnaire and to allow for a fine-tuning of questions and items. The interview process gathered a total of 250 transcribed pages. The transcription was done verbatim and also includes intermissions, emotional impulses and emphases with the objective that third persons should be able to "relive" the interview. The texts were then systemised by way of a qualitative content analysis, in the present case a "reductive" content analysis that condenses the full text by coding text segments into a category system according to recurring themes that emerged within the conversation (cf. Mayring 2007).[123] The coding process was carried out with the support of the data analysis software MAXQDA 2007. Apart from facilitating the retrieval of text segments, the programme also allowed for a number of applications, such as the graphic depiction of code frequencies and relations between categories, adding to the transparency of the analysis process. The qualitative interpretation of categories, however, remains at the heart of the analysis. In the present case, this meant the detection of certain patterns that lie behind the respondents' answers, similarities, or contradictions. In the presentation of findings a number of quotations were used to illustrate the points made. Quotations were selected on the basis of 1. how well they represented the

in Brussels. It has to be noted that any reference to the work of "the representations" made by representation members themselves is therefore made on a comparatively weak empirical basis and can only serve as an indicator for very general trends and observations.

[123] Lamnek remarks that the objective of reducing a complex body of text into a manageable category system of essential themes shows a clear orientation on quantitative content analysis, but remains principally tied to the qualitative paradigm in that quantification does not constitute the dominant principle throughout the whole process and interpretations are made across categories with a view to "typical cases" (Lamnek 2005: 506, 528f). The quantitative dimension introduced by the categories can however be seen as providing a safeguard towards an all too arbitrary interpretation of results by adding a certain degree of transparency.

general views of the respondent and 2. their aptitude in offering insights into the factors that influence the work of spokespersons in the Commission.[124] Since the interviewees were presented with rating scales, the evaluation of these items allowed a direct comparison of how individual spokespersons differ from each other with regard to certain issues. Apart from gaining numerical data for comparison, the rating scales were designed to supplement the interview questions, i.e. revealing tendencies and checking the reliability of the respondents' answers. Given the qualitative approach of the study and the fact that the size of the sample does not allow for inference statistical applications, the evaluation of the rating scales was bound to remain on a descriptive level and the level of simple frequency tables.[125] It is to be noted that respondents, when asked to rate the importance of "types of journalists" frequently pointed out that some individual journalists behave differently from others, thus making it difficult to rate them along with their colleagues. However, as respondents often saw these people as individual exceptions, the evaluation, when making assumptions on the nature of the relationship between spokespersons and journalists, refers to the general evaluation of different groups of journalists as it emerged from the interviews.

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[124] Because of the verbatim transcription mode and for reasons of readability some quotes required a slight editing for the printed presentation in comparison to the original transcript. However, as the transcripts were encoded, the original quote can be reviewed in the appendix by way of an encoding document. For reasons of confidentiality, this code is only made available to the supervisors of this study. Emphases, emotional impulses, as well as the names of media outlets were highlighted in italics. Some names, policy areas or references were replaced by the letter combination "*xyz*" in order to protect the anonymity of the respondent.

[125] Given that the total population of spokespersons at the time consisted of 27 individuals, the 18 spokespersons interviewed in Brussels constituted a two-thirds representation of their total number, permitting at least a simple descriptive analysis.

3. Findings

3.1 Quantitative Analysis

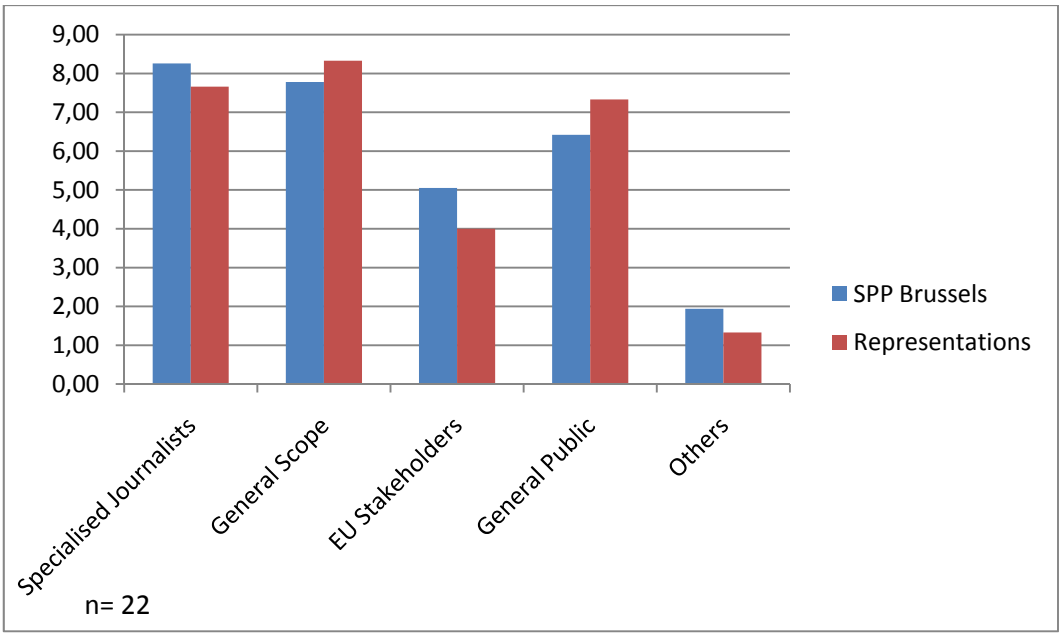
Main Target Audiences

In the first part of the questionnaire, spokespersons were asked about their main target audience. The question was designed to explore who their "daily customers" were and to establish a certain hierarchy with regard to the groups of people spokespersons deal with most frequently in their day-to-day work.

The answers were particular interesting when distinguishing between the answers of spokespersons in Brussels and those in the representations of the member states. Overall, the differences were comparatively small but nevertheless indicated some tendencies towards certain audiences: spokespersons in Brussels seem to have a slightly higher preference for specialist journalists compared to journalists with a more general scope[126] whereas the reverse seems to be the case in the representations. In addition, the "general public" scored higher in the member states compared to Brussels.

[126] Specialised journalists were thereby defined as "writing on specific items for specific sections in broadsheets or newspapers such as the *Financial Times* or the economic section of *Le Monde*, i.e. people with a very detailed demand for information" whereas journalists with a more general scope are "covering a range of EU-affairs, sometimes for different media outlets, i.e. people with a less detailed demand for information, but a greater need for understanding the background and context of an issue".

Figure V.1: "Which group of people do you regard as your main target audience?" – SPP and Representations

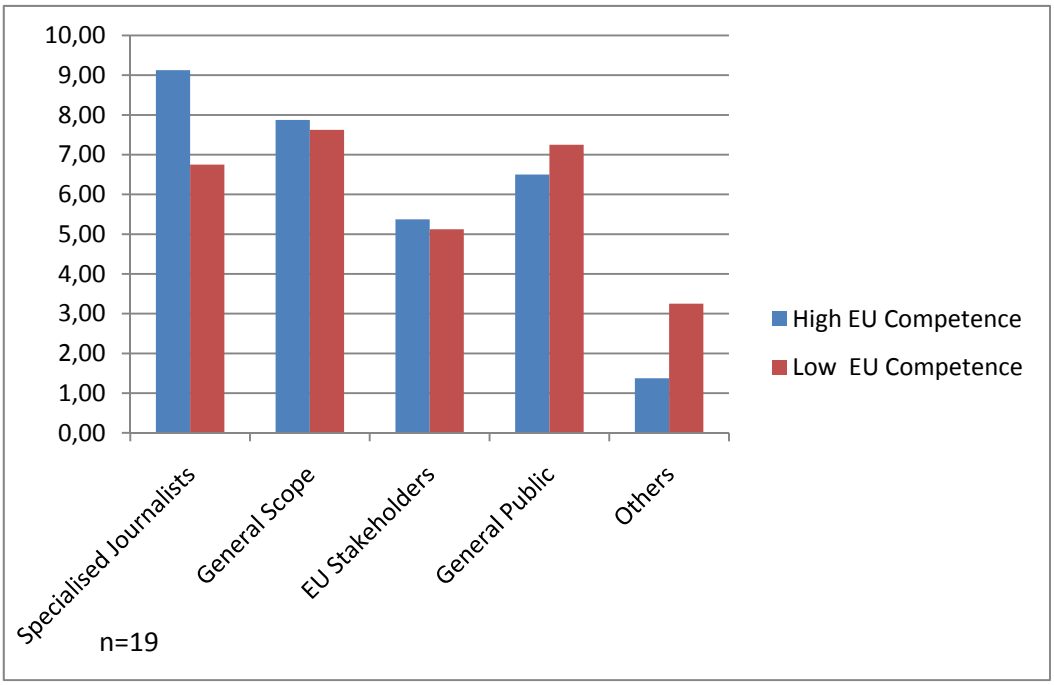


Different Portfolios – Different Styles of Communication

When trying to understand the logic of communication within the SPP, the basic assumption was that the manner of how spokespersons communicate is influenced by a whole set of factors: there is, for instance, the policy field the spokesperson represents, his or her nationality and/or the nationality of the Commissioner, the professional background (e.g. *fonctionnaire* or former journalist), but also personal convictions and individual communication styles that come into play. In the course of the interview process it became clear that one of the most important factors influencing the day-to-day work of a spokesperson is his or her portfolio. This finding is in line with the assumptions made by Koopmans/Pfetsch (cf. 2003: 15f) who believe that given the different degrees of EU competence in

different policy fields, a search for a generalised "Europeanisation" of topics may hide considerable differences between issue fields. While for some portfolios there seems to be a steady and stable interest in the press room, other spokespersons "have a selling job to do" in order to attract media coverage for their policy initiatives. It was therefore revealing to distinguish in the analysis between those portfolios where the competence of the EU is high (e.g. trade, agriculture, monetary policy) and those where EU competence is comparatively low compared to member states (e.g. sectoral policies such as research or education and culture). This was reflected in the responses linked to the choice of media outlets and target audiences: there is a stronger link between portfolios with a low EU competence and general scope journalists whereas high EU portfolios are more strongly linked to specialised media outlets.

Figure V.2: "Which group of people do you regard as your main target audience?" – Differences between Portfolios

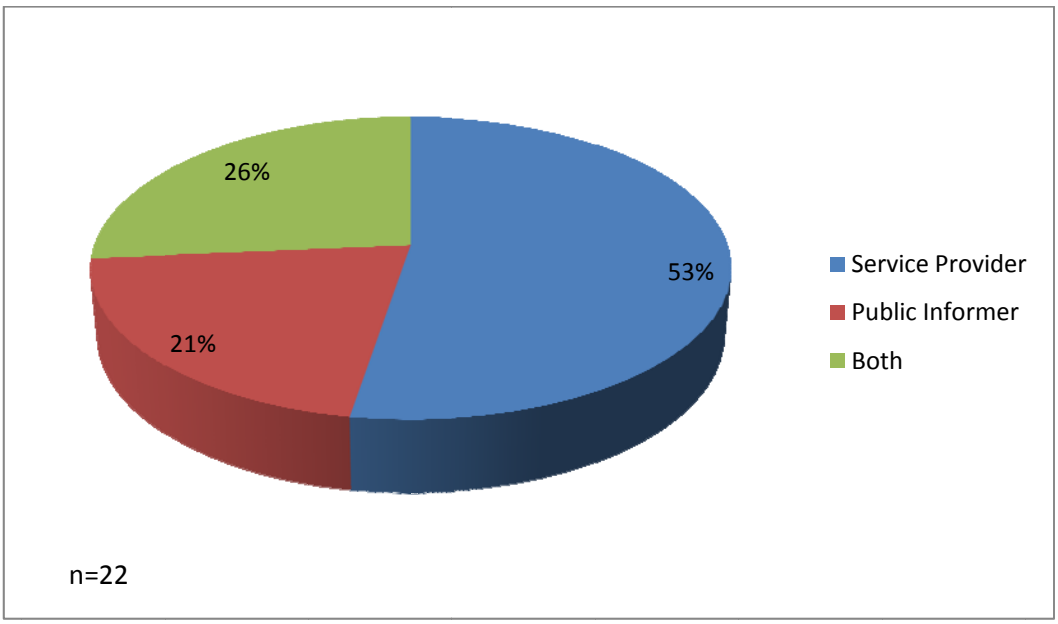


This result is not surprising when assuming that whenever the EU has a strong competence this has naturally triggered the evolution of many specialist media outlets in those fields. However, it appears slightly paradox that especially in those fields where the EU plays the most important role, media coverage seems to move to specialised media or specialised sections of the broadsheet press. Apparently, high EU competence in many cases also means high complexity and therefore a high degree of specialisation.

Role perception: service provider to journalists or public informer?

This question essentially referred to how the respondents generally perceived their own professional role. As the interviewer was aware that the two roles are inter-linked, the objective was to receive a quick, spontaneous answer that would reflect the respondents' "gut feeling" about the routine of their day-to-day job.

Figure V.3: "Do you regard yourself as a service provider to journalists or as a public informer?"

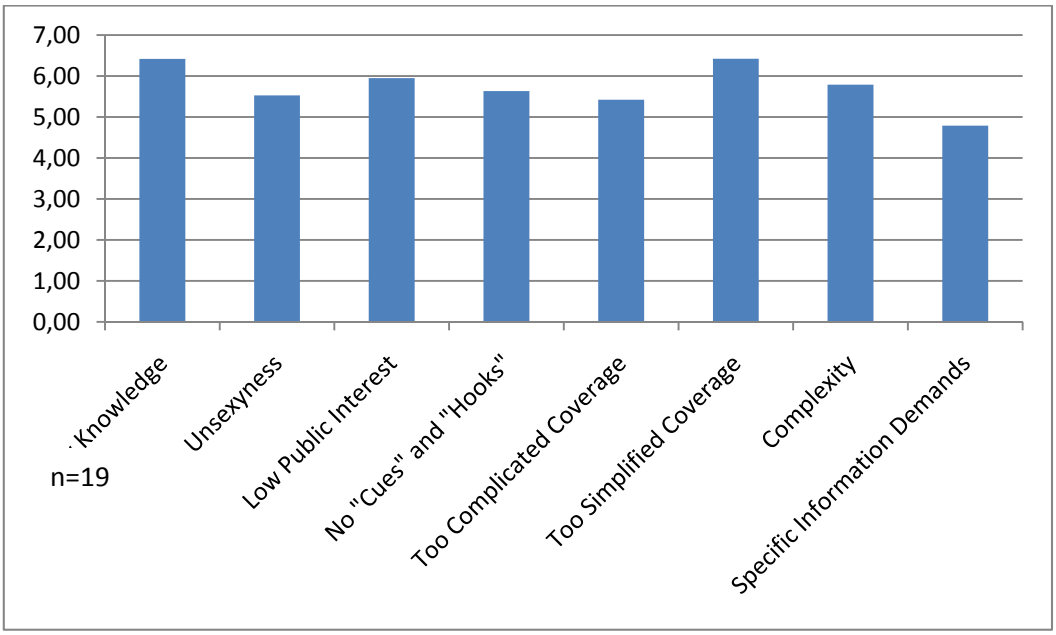


The diagram above shows the total number of responses. It is however interesting to note that spokespersons who saw themselves as "public informers" either work in a representation or in a "low EU Competence" portfolio. This could perhaps suggest that the less specialised the portfolio, the more the public comes into play as a reference point or – as already indicated above – that "high EU Competence" portfolios lead to a higher focus on specialised journalists with a specific demand for information.

Factors that may act as structural barriers to communicating EU policies to the public

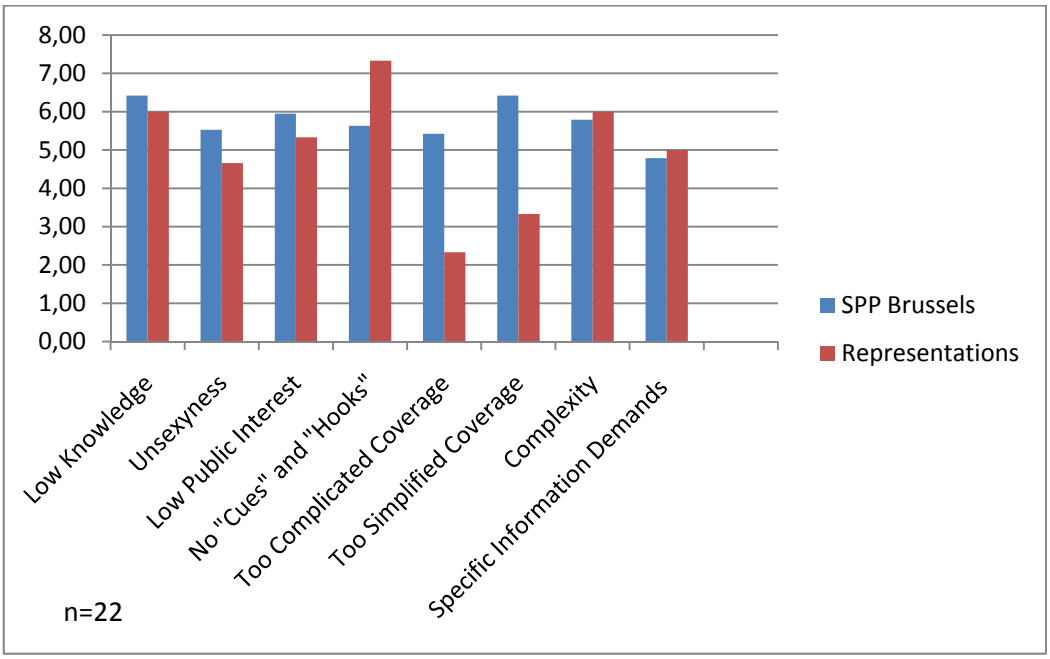
Most spokespersons agreed on the influence of certain factors that sometimes make it difficult to communicate EU policies to the media. There were no major differences between the portfolios, the two factors receiving the highest ratings were "low knowledge" and a "too simplified, i.e. 'cliché-driven' media coverage". While attaching "low knowledge" a high level of importance, many respondents pointed out that there was also a low degree of knowledge about national political systems and that this factor was therefore not one that distinguishes the EU from member states. In line with the assumptions made in chapter IV.1.6, the complexity of issues appears to be underestimated in particular by those who work in the "Brussels bubble" environment.

Figure V.4: "Given the lack of debate on Europe in the wider public, a number of possible reasons have been suggested … how important would you consider the following factors in contributing to this lack of debate?" - SPP



This point is more strongly reflected when comparing the answers of the Brussels-based spokespersons to those in the representations. Here, the lack of "cues" and "hooks" that would facilitate the "selling" of stories to the media was regarded as the most important factor. In contrast, the factors "too simplified" or "too complicated" media coverage featured comparatively low down on the scale. A – tentative – assumption could be that people in the representations might care less about the nature of the article as long as the EU features in the local media *at all*, whereas SPP members in the high-involvement Brussels environment perhaps feel more strongly bothered about a too simplified coverage.

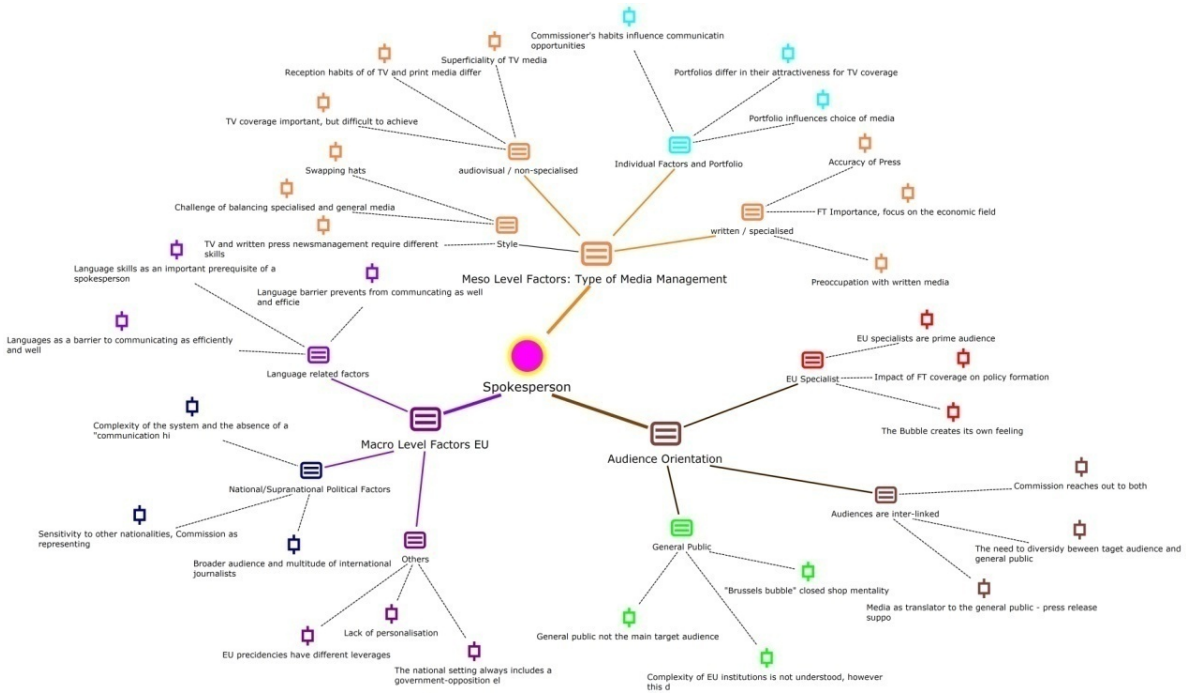
Figure V.5: "Given the lack of debate on Europe in the wider public, a number of possible reasons have been suggested … how important would you consider the following factors in contributing to this lack of debate?" - SPP and Representations



3.2 Qualitative Analysis

The interviews have revealed a number of factors that exert a significant influence on how Commission spokespersons manage the information flow between EU institutions and the media. The interviews were content analysed according to a category system, reflecting those impact factors on different levels. The computer-assisted analysis allows for a graphical illustration of this process, figure V.6 shows an overview of the various impact factors on the level of main categories, subcategories, and single statements.

Figure V.6: Impact Factors on Spokespersons' day-to-day Work Routine



The computer-assisted analysis of the data also offered the possibility to detect interrelations between some of these factors. MAXQDA 2007 features a "code-relations-browser" that is able to measure the proximity of text segments, i.e. a tool that visualises a correspondence between categories with similar word patterns. In the present case and with regard to the research hypotheses, it was for instance illuminating to see which categories were related to each other.

Figure V.7: Code-Relations between Impact Factors and "Audience"

The code-relations-browser shows, for instance, a relation between the categories "National/supranational political factors"[127] and "Different perception by the general public".[128] This indicates a split in media use and audiences as a result of macro-level factors. Similarly, the browser shows a strong relation between "Perception" and the "Impact of complexity",[129] between the "Importance of elite media" and "Individual factors and portfolios" and between "Specialists as prime

[127] This category comprises text segments that concern influences stemming from the macro setting of multilevel governance: e.g. "promoting European interest vs. national interest", "communication driven by compromise" or "different nationalities interested in different EU topics".

[128] Referring to statements made with regard to different perceptions of EU topics by the general public in comparison to an expert audience: e.g. "low levels of interest and knowledge", "difficulty of communicating the complexity of EU-issues to the general public" or "different perception of what is important".

[129] Coded as a meso-level factor, the "Impact of Complexity" refers to statements concerning the mode of information provision: e.g. "the difficulty of communicating in an accessible, yet detailed enough way".

audience" and "Audiences are inter-linked". The latter connection supports a recurring pattern of answers that distinguished between expert and general public audiences but found them to be interlinked. While the code-relations browser, as a complimentary tool measuring the quantity of recurring "similar" text patterns does not substitute the process of qualitative content analysis by way of analysing "typical cases", it essentially supports the validity of the qualitative findings presented in the following.

The subsequent parts of the analysis make reference to the different open-ended questions asked in the interview and the responses to them. The findings are structured according to the different sections of the topic guide: the first part deals with responses concerning the different working conditions in the EU as compared to the national setting, the second part refers to the different types of media and their treatment by spokespersons while the third part touches on the relationship between media outlets and audiences, framing and other aspects of media relations.

3.2.1 Media Relations EU vs. National

Complexity of Institutional Setting and Linguistic Diversity

When asked about the specific difference in the work of a European spokesperson compared to that of a national spokesperson, respondents cited three main points time and again: the influence of the different languages, the number of media outlets and the complexity of the multilevel structure. The majority of respondents believe that the number of 23 official EU languages has a very fundamental influence, in a practical sense, on the way and style messages are conveyed to the media. This does not only concern technical issues such as the time lag that is caused by translation, but also the fact that the recipients of the message have

many different political and cultural communication contexts in which they receive and understand a message.

> "That is also difficult for me as a spokesperson because I am not working in my mother tongue, but also difficult in terms of the audience, because with what I am going to say I cannot count on the fact that everything will be understood the same way or with the same easiness by everybody in the audience and I think that is a difference that you do not face in the national context and that references are also more similar than here, so if, for example, I want to play with the words and use a proverb that would come to my mind naturally, I would not be able to do so, because that may not apply in other languages, I would even have difficulties to translate it into English or French." (11: 1)[130]

> "The first thing any spokesperson learns here is that the most dangerous thing to do here is to crack a joke, because what might sound funny in French can sound very offensive in English – not to speak of other languages. So I think there are quite simply limits to the colourfulness of our language if we don't want to run the risk of further misunderstandings." (14: 8)

The impact languages have on the dissemination of messages becomes particularly apparent when providing the audiovisual media with attractive soundbites. The fact that most electronic media prefer statements in the language of their country of origin leads to a lesser degree of output when compared to the written media or a national setting. In addition it leads to a situation where the spokespersons frequently "step in" for their Commissioners who might not be equally linguistically talented.[131] A soundbite delivered by a spokesperson might

[130] Interview transcription, number refers to encoded interview and page of the original transcript.

[131] Spokespersons are expected to communicate in the press room in English and French. Most spokespersons master some additional languages to a degree that they feel comfortable enough to go on record in the audiovisual media. *Euronews*, for instance, makes frequent use of spokespersons' soundbites (cf. interview 11: 4).

however not be equally attractive to a mass audience as a soundbite by the Comissioner him- or herself. The European Union's multilevel structure and its inherent complexity present a threshold that needs to be overcome when communicating to the general public.

> "We are working in an environment that our audience – the media, and the audience behind them, the readers and viewers of the media – don't understand immediately. It's not self-evident. So if you talk in my home country about 'the government has decided', 'the Parliament has voted' everybody will understand what this means. Here, when people talk about an EU directive or anything, there is translation work required between what we say, how we communicate it to the journalists and how the journalists then communicate it back to their audience. And the first part of the translation process we have to do, because people are not used to this process in their everyday life. One has to explain it, one has to justify it much more and the first question that always comes up, that probably doesn't come up in a national context, is: 'Why does the EU have to do this'?" (19: 1)

The difficulty consists in explaining the intricacies of a system that lies beyond the immediate reality of the day-to-day life of citizens. While conceding that national political systems possess a high degree of complexity when being examined at the nitty-gritty level, the multilevel structure of EU politics is of a significantly different quality particularly in terms of information-processing and -retention which largely depend on mental "short cuts" for the reduction of complexity and decision-making. Whereas in member states governments and Heads of State are held accountable by the citizens for their decisions, the European Union is marked by a unique system of dividing power and responsibility. As outlined, the Nice Treaty provides for 50 different modes of taking decisions (cf. chapter IV.1.3). To explain why in a certain policy field the responsibility lies with a certain member state, while in another the supranational level is to be held accountable, presents a formidable challenge for any EU spokesperson. Here, general public audience knowledge about the EU decision-

making process is simply not on the same level as knowledge about domestic policies (cf. Eurobarometer on the future of Europe, 2006).

Number of Media Outlets within the EU

Compared to their counterparts in national governments, EU-spokespersons have to cover a significantly higher number of media outlets and potential audiences while having considerably fewer resources at their disposal.[132] This invariably leads to a situation where the spokesperson's knowledge of the media and home audiences in 27 Members States is effectively limited.

> "The size of the audience is huge, not just because of the journalists accredited in Brussels, but all over the European Union we are at the end of the day addressing almost 500 million citizens and, in my field, I'm working with *xyz*, so this is an additional big public." (11: 1)

> "In my day-to-day-life, for example, I have to see all the newspapers to monitor all the EU media first thing in the morning to see more or less what's going on in my topic on the EU level. Another difficulty is that you don't have the feeling, you don't know the different nationalities so you don't have exactly the feeling how important an issue is, *xyz* for example, for Greek people – how delicate, how sensitive? Will they be furious? What will be the reaction? Will they get angry or what will be the questions, possible questions? I mean, you have a set of questions that you can predict, but then it turns into a national issue and you can get all sorts of questions." (5: 1)

> "If you work for the European Commission, you are part of a multicultural environment in Brussels and have a lot of different audiences and it is very difficult to manage, e.g. that you know

[132] Comparing the communication-related budget figures of member states and those of the European Commission in 2006, the German Government, for instance, has almost double the amount of funds, i.e. 224 billion vs. 118 billion EUR, at its disposal with which it caters for a total population of 82 million citizens, whereas the European Union has to cover 494 million citizens (cf. Kurpas et al. 2007: 62).

> perfectly well which story plays in Andalucía and which story plays in Lithuania because the context is a completely different one." (16: 8)

Given the lack of in-depth knowledge about a high number of media outlets and also a lack of familiarity with the subtleties of a specific cultural context does in many cases lower the chances of placing a story by giving it the right "spin", i.e. making it interesting for a particular local audience.

The Prevalence of National Public Spheres

The fact that member states sometimes have conflicting national interests frequently presents spokespersons with a dilemma in the event of one and the same EU-policy resulting in an outcome that could be seen as positive in one member state and negative in the other.

> "There are things that are really interesting for one country that just don't play at all in another one or there are differences, like, take the wine reform – perfect example – you've got wine producing countries and wine drinking countries and to the wine producing countries you want to say: 'It's all right, you are not going to be out of job', and to the wine drinking countries you just want to say: 'Cheap wine!' - You can't do that in one press release!" (4: 9)

The example illustrates the lingering potential of clashes between national public arenas when it come to certain domestic issues, in spite of increasing transnationalisation processes in other areas (cf. chapter III.2.3). The number of nationalities and languages also has implications for the conduct of the off-the-record exchange. Although it would be expected that the complexity of subjects required a higher degree of off-the-record exchange as a result of a higher demand for explanation of certain policies, a surprisingly high number of spokespersons

responded that there was actually a lesser amount of background briefing in a European press conference.

> "In the country I know best, my own home country, there is a lot of bilateral background spinning going on, which is natural, because the sample of journalists for e.g. the spokesperson of *xyz* or Foreign Minister, is limited as such, because in smaller countries you have a very limited pool of journalists who are interested in your story. In Brussels this is completely different, because you have about 1300 accredited journalists now and potentially not each and every one, but most of them, might be interested in your stories, because most of them have to cover more or less everything that is going on in Brussels. So there is a difference in as far as you have a much, much broader audience and it's much, much more difficult to have these bilateral background talks." (16: 2)

As a result the off-the-record briefing – while remaining the dominant mode of information exchange – is carried out on a more restrained level than expected. Another implication is that the "technical message" prevails over the "political message", and there is a more reserved style of communication provision in order not to "put off" individual member states whose correspondents might feel left out or because the spokesperson does not want to be seen favouring journalists of a certain nationality.

> "Possibly, actually, there is less off-the-record going on at the EU because everything that we want to do should be transparent, should be open, we should have no secrets, the supranational entity has to justify its existence constantly and therefore would not take recourse to as much background as a national government would do. We also want to be seen as open to all journalists of all different types of journals and of all different types of nationality, so actually there is a conscious policy choice not to have a privileged relationship with one or two papers which are then your kind of official mouthpieces, but we want to reach out to everybody and therefore we tend to be more on-the-record as opposed to off-the-record which, of course, has sometimes the disadvantage that our message doesn't get across

> because the on-the-record message that is supposed to be inclusive is then a bit superficial and obviously also a bit technocratic." (1: 1)

The more careful application of off-the-record exchanges in the European environment and the fact that one single spokesperson has to provide information for a large and heterogeneous number of correspondents can prevent political communication in the Commission from being as tailored to the needs of the individual journalist as might be the case in a national setting.

3.2.2 Media Relations and Types of Media

Specialist Orientation

As stated before, presented with a rating scale, spokespersons tended to rate "specialised journalists" for specific media outlets higher than "journalists with a more general scope" who target a general public audience. Apart from the fact that specialist journalists tend to form the largest part of what some spokespeople referred to as their "daily clients", "constituency" or "customers", they also fulfil an opinion-leading and agenda-setting role:

> "The specialised journalists are very important for us. Specialist journalists are followed by others, what might appear in the *Financial Times* or *Le Monde* today will almost always appear in other newspapers in a day or two so it's important to make sure that these key journalists get the story right. So for that reason we devote a lot of attention." (15: 3)

As was mentioned in the same context, significant differences among the portfolios became apparent. There is a higher preference for the opinion-leading elite press in those portfolios in which the European Union has a higher level of competence (in particular the economic portfolios) in comparison to those in

which the European Union plays a more coordinating role, i.e. most cross-sectional policy fields. In the latter case, the spokesperson has "a selling job to do" (cf. interview 4: 8) and therefore tends to place a higher emphasis on the group of general-scope journalists and the audiovisual media. This somewhat paradoxically leads to a situation in which decisive policy issues with a potentially profound impact on the general public are predominantly discussed in the specialised or broadsheet media. These, in the economic field, include first of all the *Financial Times*, but also specialised national press. On the significant influences of these papers a respondent remarked:

> "We are very much focused – especially from my perspective whose job was in an economic field – we are very much focused on big economic journals. I mean, in this field *50 per cent* comes from the *Financial Times*, it is *the* crucial paper. And then in Germany, there is *Handelsblatt* and the *Financial Times Deutschland* and in France, there is *Les Echos* and possibly *Le Monde* and in Spain, there is *El Pais* and then *Il Corriere* in Italy." (1: 2)

> "The opinion page of the *Financial Times* is super important. That page at the back of the *Financial Times* where eminent economists and people from the World Bank and people from all these financial institutions voice their opinion – that shapes the entire internal market policy and the competition policy and probably the economic and monetary policy. It is absolutely – I would even say – *irrelevant* what the evening talk show host on the television says on this matter and probably what the citizens think about this matter has not played a decisive role, at least in financial services and other fields driven by economics. We are really having a debate with the sort of top 10 per cent of the economic community who write in the *Financial Times*." (1: 2)

The focus on elite press outlets may in some cases reflect the preferences of the Commissioners themselves who are at times less concerned with the scope of communication, but more about featuring in high-status media outlets.

> "The Commissioners want to be seen in certain papers, sometimes. So they aren't so bothered about how many people read about it if they are on the frontpage of the *FT* – or even in the second or third page of the *FT*. But then there's a pressure on my colleagues who perhaps will know that's not the best place to be talking about this [policy field]." (4: 4)

The special role of the *Financial Times* was the subject of comment in nearly every interview. Its status as opinion leader within the Brussels media was universally recognised but at times also heavily criticised for being overrated in its influence, particularly in comparison to specialised audiovisual media outlets. Not least, there has been a growing awareness that the focus on elite media is not sufficient in terms of getting the public involved:

> "Perceptions are evolving fast here. Probably most people from the outside would assume that for any given spokesperson the *FT* [*Financial Times*] is the pinnacle and all the rest comes after, but I think that is changing. Not because the *FT* is getting any worse or less important, but because people realise – I mean, this was the heart of the whole debate we have had over the last few years about Europe, the citizens, the right dosage of information policy – that there is no *one* medium which gives you the whole of Europe. Obviously, in terms of Brussels, if I put it [*the story*] on *Euronews*, some people will watch it, others won't, whilst with the *FT* it's very likely that everybody within the 'Brussels beltway' will have read it. But the 'Brussels beltway' is not the whole of Europe." (14: 4f)

> "It's very important that we *do* continue to focus on audiovisual, because we *do* reach a bigger audience. Initially I made the sort of apparently obvious mistake in speaking almost only to the *Le Mondes*, to the *Guardians*, to the *Handelsblatts* and *El Pais's* of Europe which, of course, only reach a very limited audience, because everybody considered these to be the 'good newspapers'." (12: 2)

The view is also confirmed by the perception spokespersons have of their own role: a majority of spokespersons see themselves as "service providers to

journalists" rather than "public informers", again a view that is more pronounced in the economy related fields. Apart from the division between specialised and general scope journalists in the Brussels press corps, there is also the even stronger division between those journalists in Brussels and those in the member states.

> "It's very interesting, if I speak with journalists who *visit* Brussels they all complain about our press releases being over-technical, not to the point, not having a simple message. If I speak to a number of accredited journalists here in Brussels they tell me exactly the contrary, they say: your press releases are becoming useless. Because we know *everything* you've written in there. We need to go *beyond* that soundbite, we need to go beyond that catchphrase – we are specialists so serve us well by producing press releases that give an added value. So, you see, there is also a very diversified expectation from the media themselves and we try to cater for that." (14: 8)

Simultaneously catering for such diverse demands for information at times presents a veritable dilemma in balancing accessibility and depth of information, even more so when keeping in mind that the two types of journalists also tend to serve two different audiences who are interested in different aspects of EU policies. In terms of communication, it is obvious that there are two different audiences to address, the so-called "Brussels bubble" insiders, who operate in the immediate environment of the European institutions, and the general public.

> "They are separate audiences (…), there is quite simply a group of people who are very much taken into the specific policy process that plays out in Brussels or in the US in Washington and then there are the other people who are more interested in the policy outcomes. I'll give you an example to illustrate that was very telling for me: one day, we presented here in our Brussels press room child-proof lighters and it drew a unanimous yawn through the whole ranks of our press room. Nothing about the Treaty, nothing about personalities who could become President of the Commission or High Representative or whatever (…) nevertheless, in terms of the press uptake beyond

> Brussels, it was actually one of the better issues which became quite widely reported in the press close to the people. It was certainly not the subject of national broadsheets, but the regional press, radios and also some TV stations took it up quite intensively, they were reached obviously via *EBS* transmission of that particular midday briefing." (14: 6)

The picture of the "Brussels beltway" or "Brussels bubble" in fact reflects the division between transnational expert audience and general public very adequately. Spokespersons who operate in Brussels naturally tend to receive immediate feedback on their communications from within the "Brussels bubble" rather than from audiences in the member states.

Preoccupation with the Written Press

The aforementioned specialist orientation and the complex nature of issues have an impact on which type of media outlet is the preferred channel of information release. EU topics appear to lend themselves more easily to the written broadsheet press than to the audiovisual media. This is also reflected by how many of the news reports that are debated in the 10 o'clock strategy meeting are written press and how many are audiovisual. Spokespersons here almost unanimously agreed that the usual ratio is eight written press reports compared to only two audiovisual reports. The reason for this is largely attributed to the monitoring system: while the articles of leading European papers are reflected in the morning press review, there is no comparable monitoring system in place for audiovisual reports. Audiovisual items are brought to the spokespersons' attention either via an alert from the representation in a member state[133] or by chance (cf. interviews 3: 2, 8: 1, 4: 2). Spokespersons also agree in their assessment that because of the very

[133] Although most representations have some sort of audiovisual monitoring service in place, quality and scope vary to a considerable degree.

nature of the medium, audiovisual reports tend to be more superficial and, because of time constraints, offer less background information. For many portfolios this makes it difficult to reflect on the more far-reaching implications of an EU policy matter and is therefore likely to produce a tendency towards oversimplification.

> "They have to break down the story much, much more generally and have to explain much, much more and better why a specific issue should matter to its audiences, so again there the challenge for TV to do a European story is much, much bigger than the challenge for the *Financial Times* who can just have 800 words to explain a rather complicated issue. If you just have 30 seconds and you have to also translate things into images, this is much, much more difficult and hence the level of detail normally is much lower." (16: 3)

In many portfolios, spokespersons tend to cater for a daily clientele of specialised, predominantly written press elite media outlets. It is however acknowledged that the audiovisual media reach a wider audience and therefore serve a different purpose. A frequently mentioned problem for the audiovisual media is that the complexity of many issues is difficult to package in a 1min30 television piece, the TV media are also said to adopt a more sensational framing.

> "I think of my previous professional experience, because I was a TV journalist myself in this press room and, clearly, as a TV journalist I struggled a lot with not being able to or being able to find a way to still put the story right without getting into *all* the details and being able to do it in 1min 20, so this is very difficult and I think many of the TV journalists may not spend so much time reflecting on putting these complexities together." (11: 2)

> "One of the biggest problems TV editors have with Europe and Brussels is: how do I translate this story into images and pictures? If you have a meeting of ministers, somewhere in Luxemburg, just sitting around the table, this doesn't give you very good images, so they always have to think about: how do we frame this story in a way that becomes tangible and concrete? Which means that they have to go out in addition to filming the event itself – which is normally a

> boring meeting and grey people in grey suits running around which is not very attractive – and think: how do you spice it up?" (16: 4)

In the virtual absence of well-known personalities and faces that are familiar to *all* Europeans, the challenge to find cues and hooks is particularly difficult for audiovisual media. In terms of reaching out to the general public it has been a persisting problem for EU communication, as a majority of European citizens state that television is their preferred source of information on EU issues and also consider that television and radio do not give enough coverage to the European Union (cf. chapter IV.1.5).

3.2.3. Media Relations and Audiences

European vs. National Framing

The audiovisual media and specialised written press are clearly found to relate to different audiences, although TV audience and tabloid press readers are found to overlap.

> "Surveys that we conduct at the European level, Eurobarometer, indicate that the general public obtains 70 per cent of its news requirements from the TV, so the TV is very much geared to the needs of Mr. Joe Bloggs as the average citizen whereas the reading of newspapers is a declining trend over time and tends to be done by those with a certain educational level, although the 'Boulevardpresse' are probably wider read. After all, in the UK, for instance, the *Sun* I think is the widest circulating newspaper with 4 million daily readers and that's a tabloid. So, the audiences for the tabloids might overlap quite significantly with the audiences for TV reporting whereas the broadsheets, I think, have a far more educated audience than would be the case for the TV, average national TV network." (7: 3)

In terms of the general approach and framing, there also seems to be an aspect of a more transnational, issue-specific angle in the specialised written press in contrast to a more domestic, political angle in the audiovisual media.

> "The written press, now, the newspapers and especially those key newspapers that report on economics, they go very much into detail and what I find good about the press is that they don't just see the European angle but they see the global angle, the international angle (…). On the other hand, the audiovisual coverage sees the EU as a political entity and does not focus *at all*, in my opinion, on the economic aspects of the EU – which are actually quite important or even more important. (…) In the economic papers we are actually part of a bigger game and we have a role to play and we are respected for that." (1: 3)

> "The other thing is that there is a lot more specialist written press for the EU, things like the *European Voice* (...) apart from *Euronews* – there isn't very much that's European on television and so there is always this national angle and you really need to find the national angle to get stuff onto TV, unless it's a really big issue." (4: 3)

The different framing of EU topics in terms of "national" or "European" by written press and audiovisual media must be taken into account when evaluating the prospects for a transnationalisation of domestic public spheres. Most content-analysis studies in this area have been based on the written press and quality newspapers in particular. Results that suggest a developed stage of "Europeanisation" of media coverage might therefore appear rather optimistic when solely being based on the analysis of broadsheets.

On the other hand, the written media tend to reflect a higher degree of editorial content and interpretation whereas the coverage in the audiovisual media, despite being inherently more superficial in its approach, tends to be less distorted, because endowed with less "opinion".

> "Of course, the audiovisual media can always cut and edit the statement you or your Commissioner made for TV or radio, but you still hear literally what your Commissioner is saying or what you yourself are saying – whereas when you give an interview to a written media, say a newspaper, you have a lot of uncertainties: a) you cannot control the size of the article which often is far smaller than the information which was passed on, so a selection of all information and arguments you purposely passed on – as important to you or your Commissioner to build up your case – will be made by the media, b) you most certainly have no control over the take of the article and c) even if the article as such is okay, then it can be destroyed altogether by a screaming headline which was imposed by the editor from the capital who therewith imposes his paper's spin." (12: 1)

> "The thing is when you are on *Euronews* it's *you* talking, when you are talking to an *FT* journalist – particularly as often it's off-the-record – there is always a spin on it, their angle on it. So it can come out, you know, it could seem great, but it can come out quite badly for you even when you thought it was going to work quite well." (4: 4)

The statements acknowledge the opportunity that the visual media offer spokespersons to communicate directly in their own words (provided there is no translation necessary). It also reveals some of the factors indigenous to the media system and their treatment of the communication stimulus. The "editor in the capital" is often more detached from the initial story in Brussels than would be the case in a national setting, at times this is reflected by a sort of "EU fatigue" in member states' editorial offices.

Communicating to Different Audiences

Statements frequently dealt with the challenge to reduce the complexity of European issues and to make them accessible to different audiences. The accusation of providing "propaganda" is a problem most governmental spokespersons have to deal with – be it in a national context or a European. Whereas the "spin" applied in national governments is mostly a party-political

one, EU spokespersons are accused by journalists of promoting a much more basic "pro-EU" stance. This, however, appears to be a side-effect triggered by trying to communicate to two different audience at the same time.

> "This is one of the biggest challenges you are faced with as a spokesperson, you are always walking a very fine line between oversimplifying, being accused of disseminating propaganda and going too much into detail and becoming too technical, because you are faced with two completely different audiences in the media, the specialised media who know normally very much everything about context and how a certain policy area works, so you don't have to tell them and they are very much interested into nitty-gritty detail and then you have the general correspondents who don't have the time to absorb all this information and there you have to, if you want to sell a story or convey a message, you always have to start to give them the whole context again, where you are coming from. And these two – also in the press room sometimes – are not really compatible, because the information demands of one group and the other groups don't necessarily match, because what is too general for one group of journalists is already too specific for the others and the other way round." (16: 4)

The often-voiced criticism that "the EU should avoid jargon and propaganda at all costs" and instead "should provide objective information using simple language" (Harding 2002: 1) appears not to take the reality of a separation of expert and general public audience into account.

> "It's a tricky one because if you are communicating to the journalists here they expect a certain amount of complexity and detail and they complain when there isn't enough detail. If you are going to communicate to a broader audience on the national level it has to be simplified because they don't have the detailed knowledge. So in the ideal world you have our appallingly complicated press releases here – although they could be better in having a few soundbites at the beginning and a nice simple summary – but then to communicate it on to a national audience you have to have someone to actually convert it into something more catchy, easy to understand. We have to find a

> sort of real life example of why what we are doing matters and that's where we often fall down." (7: 3).

As a manifestation of the challenge of reducing complexity while maintaining a certain level of detail, the design of press releases was the subject of frequent comment.

> "With 1200 people in the press corps accredited to the institution, it's not a surprise that the will be quite different categories. So we face a challenge when we issue a press release: how do we write it in such a way as to deliver the detailed information that the experts need and make it accessible to those who are generalists because they are the only local correspondent [for their newspaper] and they have to cover all the issues that the EU throws at them." (7: 8)

> "I think for a press release to be interesting you need a political message upfront and then you can go down into detail. I mean all our press releases have a message followed by a background briefing which should take people to the history of the dossier, if you like. It isn't easy to get that balance right but if you don't get it right then you lose the impact of the story." (15: 5)

> "One of the problems is that Commission officials don't put themselves in the shoes of the journalist or the general public enough. I think we should devote more attention to how we draft press releases. I think we should always ensure that press releases are drafted in the final instance by somebody whose mother tongue is that of the press release. I think we have a slight hang-up about saying things simply because it appears unsophisticated, it appears that we are not giving full weight to the subject. But I notice, you know, that with Commissioner *xyz*, for example, he's constantly pressing out words that nobody will understand what this means, but I think because people deal with a subject for too long, people are in the institutions too long, they have lost this awareness." (15: 5)

The statement again refers to the structural phenomenon of the "Brussels bubble" in which Commission spokesperson operate even when they communicate to "generalists" (who invariably over time become a part of the expert environment

themselves, even as non-specialists). The communication culture based on jargon tends to be sustained by a lack of immediate feedback. However, distinguishing between portfolios is important also when it comes to the complexity of press releases.

> "I found for many years that our press releases are indeed a bit complicated, but once again, it depends on the topic which is being explained in the press release. My grandmother or my cousin will never ever read a press release on a competition case. Let's be clear. Press releases on competition cases are *not* for the general public, but press releases on fisheries or press releases on the impact of the Erasmus programme should be readable for the general public." (2: 8)

The quote again reveals differences between portfolios and how they relate to a specialist or general public audience.

3.2.4 Suggestions for Improvement

After the initial analysis of context factors influencing the provision of information, the topic guide concluded with a question about "three things you would change in order to improve communication" and invited respondents to think freely about measures that would make their lives as Commission spokespersons easier. By referring to an imaginary "carte blanche" and a situation free of organisational and monetary restrictions, the question was less designed to evoke criticism of the current setting, but rather to provoke a kind of wider refection and brainstorming on the conditions provided for the work of a communication expert. Indeed, it seemed that people were generally content with the current organisation of the SPP and some of the reforms introduced during the first Barroso Commission.

> "I have to say for the first time there is a real attempt of planning, even to ask the Commission to modify the calendar and to influence

> the procedures in order to have a good main story at least every day." (9: 3f)

The forward-planning described can be seen as a first step towards adopting a "political marketing approach" where matters of communication become considered already at the beginning of the political process rather than being just an add-on at the very end (cf. Scammell 1999: 723).

> "There has been in this current Barroso Commission a remarkable shift with the 'citizens agenda' [134] in 2006 towards more citizen-friendly and consumer-friendly topics. So if you would now analyse really the Commission agendas and the main topics, you would realise that they are more than relevant to the general public. I mean roaming or climate change, energy policy, etc. – that's only a few examples." (10: 7f)

In spite of these advancements, the interview process revealed a number of suggestions for improvement. The most frequently mentioned points referred to broadly three areas: resources and structure of the SPP, the day-to-day organisation of media work and relations with the representations and monitoring. As far as the organisation of communication related work in the Commission goes, respondents remarked that the SPP should become more independent within the structure of DG COMM, particularly in terms of resources. The role DG COMM plays in the communication process does not always seem entirely clear to the members of the SPP.

> "I would probably get rid of a lot of what is in DG COMM at the moment and spend the money much more sensibly (…) I would have

[134] The "citizens agenda" is part of a broad initiative surrounding the promotion of a "Europe of Results". The agenda is not a communication initiative as such, but predominantly focuses on issues of the single market and the delivery of tangible policy outputs (cf. http://ec.europa.eu/citizens_agenda/index_en.htm).

> far more people doing front-of-house communication. But this is the sort of arrogance of the spokesman talking really, because I'm sure that people elsewhere in DG COMM do very valuable jobs, but nonetheless we don't see the tangible results from here." (3: 7)
>
> "I would create easier and more disciplined structures of providing information for people who work on communication – so I would review certainly this system of DG COMM, the spokesman service, the information units in the DGs and the way these different actors cooperate with each other." (11: 6)

It was frequently said that the number of spokespeople should be reduced and connected to competence clusters with a leading role taken up by the President in order to increase their political authority.

> "I would reduce the number of spokespeople and would create a proper hierarchy around the core competences of the Commission, making the role of the spokesperson of the Commission even more clear as the *only* person carrying that title, if necessary with a big capital 'S' as speaking in the name of the institution." (17: 6)
>
> "I would not include them any more in DG COMM, but organise them as a service of the President and I would give them full possibility to request all kinds of information they need from the DGs and give them in each DG a team that they can control of at least five people who could give them information on their request, give them briefings at a very short notice." (20: 7)

The statements in effect call for a further centralisation and "presidentialisation" of communication in the SPP.[135] Although this notion does not directly contradict the White Paper's objective of decentralisation and "going local" (cf. chapter II.2.3), it certainly calls for a tighter grip on the strategic direction of messages under the direction of the SPP and the Commission's spokesperson in particular.

[135] The centralisation of communication activities has been an essential feature of "modernised" political communication as in Europe for the first time exemplified by the New Labour government in the wake of their 1997 election victory (Scammell 2001: 523).

Another point frequently mentioned was that EU institutions currently might disseminate "too much information" instead of "not enough". According to many spokespersons there should be a focus on fewer key messages that are of real interest to the media. Yet, it was also acknowledged that if such a strategy was put into practice, this could lead to irritations among portfolios or Commissioners.

> "If we don't have news, we should not communicate. We also should not diminish the relevance of what the Commission says with the obligation of having to say something every day even when we are sure that's not news and we will not convince anybody that this is news." (22: 7)

> "Since you have this avalanche of information coming out every day you are also blurring the picture a little bit. It would be much better to focus more and sell the good stories you have, you really want to sell hard. Put your efforts in that and leave out the maybe 70 per cent of information which is not really relevant. But on the other hand, you also know that this is very much linked to the Commission, at the end of the day, being a political institution. You have now 27 Commissioners – if a little bit less in the future – and they all want their exposure (…). So there are limits to that." (16: 9)

This could also be reflected in a reduction of the number of midday briefings. In contrast to governmental press briefings in most member states, the midday briefing takes place every week day from Monday to Friday.[136]

> "I would reduce the number of midday briefings, I would not necessarily have it every day, because I'm not convinced that we have enough information to provide every day and I have the feeling that we still have a large number of days when we are exposing ourselves to a press room without having much to offer. And being in a situation where we go on the defensive and try to explain why we are here." (11: 6f)

[136] The German "Bundespressekonferenz", in comparison, only invites government spokespersons on three occasions per week.

In terms of new information technologies, references were made to involving the internet to a greater degree. This should be done in particular with a view to convergence in the audiovisual sector and the blurring of borders between the internet and TV media.

> "The Internet, for example, offers massive possibilities, it's really changing the way television and radio and press work. There is so much greater scope to communicate directly with people, you can see that in 5 years time it'll be one basic platform – which is the web – and you'll have video, sound, text, everything all in one place, you can see it converging already. I would like to see this place give far more attention to what's happening on the web and have far more people either monitoring the web or using the web and getting involved in discussions (…) it's no coincidence that you have TV companies now that show something on the news and they'll say 'you can have your say on our website' and sometimes that feeds back in again. *CNN*, for example, and *BBC World*, they have this all the time: they may have a report from somewhere in the world and then let's say 'are you living in this part of the world? If so, send us your photographs, your reports, your …' and sometimes that feeds back into the cycle and it's the web that's driving all of that." (8: 6)

On a more general note, a considerable number of spokespersons suggested that the Commission should be more political in its communication – in Brussels, but also in the representations. This notably includes taking a more self-confident stance towards critics, to the benefit of creating a debate.

> "We should be much more kind of aggressive and combative and not be scared." (3: 8)

> "Have the guts to invite journalists into your office to give them a background talk. Have the guts to say things which create a debate as opposed to just trying to kill a debate. Stop this pathological seeking of consensus and stifling of any kind of debate, stand by your opinions." (1: 10)

The points made reflect an underlying sense of frustration with the prevailing consensual nature that shapes so much of EU communication. Interestingly, elements of "conflict" are indeed perceived as useful in communicating. Yet it refers less to the familiar form of conflict that dominates the setting in member states, i.e. the battle between political parties or between government and opposition, but to conflict lines between the European level vs. the domestic setting or inter-institutional conflicts.

3.2.5 Representations

The Commission's White Paper on Communication Policy (cf. chapter II.2.4) places a key role on the EU's representations in the member states. Acting as the communicative "arm" of the Commission, they should be instrumental in adapting the Commission's message to a local context. Spokespersons were therefore asked about the potential and limits of the "going local" strategy from their point of view. In order to supplement and juxtapose these views with an on-the-ground perspective from the member states, a selected number of representations were added to the interview sample. Most SPP members valued the role of the representations, in particular with regard to two things: customising stories to a local context and also in their role as "early warning systems".

> "They can do a lot! Because they can circulate a press release, they can put a Swedish or French or an Irish, a German spin on what they can highlight, what's perhaps interesting to that particular public. No, they are invaluable. I mean, you can say that we are disconnected. What are the French thinking about the press release I put out, I don't see, whereas the girl in the rep [representation] in Paris really sees what the French see and I'm pulling at." (13: 10)

Yet, asked about improvements from the point of view of some spokespersons in Brussels, the representations could take on a more political role:

> "It's a good idea to go local, it's common sense to go local and the Commission needs to go local, but we should make no mistake: the Commission has not the personnel to go in every capital and to compete there with the national governments, so we have to send there our most important assets which are the Commissioners. The Commissioners have to go local. The Commissioners are our public faces, they have to go to Paris, Berlin, London and communicate there – this is something that *cannot* be done by the representation that we have today (…). The representations should be our first line of defence in the member state, they should be political representations, they should be high-level political representatives of the Commission who make the link, you should not have press officers there. You should have politicians there who can feed back and make sure the right moment in time, we have the right Commissioner 'sur place'." (20: 8)

Yet, the representations themselves lack the above mentioned proximity to key figures in the process and the "political side" of a message as opposed to a mere technical information provision.

> "I would more like to see changes in the interface and way of communication between the political level and the spokesperson service (…), we often have difficulties to access information in time to do a good job or to get guidance, but also political guidance on certain issues." (19: 9)

In the context of the Communication White Paper's "going local" strategy, the representations could take on a much more comprehensive role in the legislative process, i.e. in the early consultation phase and in the interactions with local stakeholders in the member states. The potency and visibility of EU policy measures could thereby be highlighted to a much higher degree by creating local networks of expertise that are already active in the preparatory phase of the legislative process rather than communicating central agreements made in Brussels. As a respondent from a representation remarked:

> "What the representations could be very useful for, is that if they were engaged and mobilised to support with all kinds of acts of public diplomacy, sometimes communications, sometimes directer intervention with the authorities to shadow, to monitor and to give support to the implementation and the negotiation process (…) to try to keep the NGOs, business, civil society community, as close to as possible behind our policy objectives and the package." (17: 8)

On the other hand, asking members of representations about ideas for improvement, it became clear that the communication gap between the "Brussels bubble" and the general public is indeed most keenly felt when working inside the member states and that any strategy for improving the dialogue with citizens must be measured against the reality of conditions on site.

> "I think that anyone who works at a representation, he or she experiences a reality check every day and I think that we are facing a reality check a lot more than the people in Brussels and sometimes I have the feeling when I am talking to the people in Brussels on the phone, when they have ideas about how we could push a story or what type of stories we should push that they do not quite understand what people are really interested in here. If you are working at a representation then you'll have to, for example, go to the countryside quite a lot. So we sit in a nice office and we meet a lot of intellectuals, but at the same time, we have to go 200, 300 kilometres away from here and *explain* (…) for the people there. And they are a lot more different than the people in the capital or the people in Brussels." (21: 5)

Similar to their colleagues in Brussels, representation members frequently deal with language related issues and translation problems, however on a different level, they are frequently confronted with a sort of "double translation" task: first of all the translation of complex, Brussels audience related content into easy-to-understand general public related content, and secondly, trying to find

corresponding expressions for concepts, slogans and programmes in the respective member states' official language.

> "If we are talking about 'simplified and catchy' in terms that you find *one* catchy phrase for the whole of Europe and you are trying to translate it into 23 different languages, then sometimes you get really stupid things like catchy phrases that don't really come through at all." (21: 8)

> "The actual – which is ridiculous – but the actual problem is the translations: they make the texts not really come alive (…). the basis should be a general, very to-the-point, short press release and then you would have links for details, for different matters." (19: 7)

As far as political communication strategies are concerned, the contributions of the representations to media relations must be seen as unique to the European setting. The multitude of languages and cultures indeed demands a "going local" structure and adaption of media stimuli according to the needs and interests of local audiences. However, this logic in many ways runs contrary to processes of centralisation and tighter newsmanagement from Brussels. This situation mirrors one of the predicaments of political communication in a mutilevel setting: professionalising communication activities simultaneously demand centralisation on the supranational level and decentralisation on the national level.

During the interviews in the member states**,** however, it became clear that the different national settings exert a strong impact on the work of media professionals in different countries. It was felt that additional research in this direction could be of great benefit when trying to explore the prospects of the Communication White Paper's "going local" strategy. To mention just one point, there is the influence of what can be termed "general news environment", i.e. the number of news programmes and magazines devoted to political content in the weekly TV schedule. This context factor, according to the views of the representation spokespersons, greatly determines the chances of EU topics

"making it", for instance, on to the television agenda at all and should also play a role when evaluating and monitoring the media activities in the different representations.[137]

3.3 Summary

The interviews have revealed a number of factors that strongly support the assumption of an expert orientation of both European media relations and coverage. The multitude of languages, the diversity and large number of media outlets, as well as the consensus-driven nature of EU policies and the complexity of its institutional framework exert a significant influence on how Commission spokespersons manage the information flow between EU institutions and the media. These factors subsequently lead to a preference of EU topics in the specialised print media and their "structural neglect" in the popular audiovisual media. In doing so, the interaction process between EU spokespersons and journalists contributes to the gap between an "expert audience" and a "general public audience" already at the point of information provision. This process, however, differs with regard to the various policy portfolios. Somewhat surprisingly, spokespersons in those portfolios in which the EU plays the most significant role in the legislative process also display the highest specialist orientation – in spite of the potentially high impact these policies have on the general public. Yet the inherent complexity of most of such topics seem to promote a discourse "among experts" rather than triggering a wider public debate.

Television and print media are perceived to adopt a different framing of European topics: a predominantly nationalised angle in the first case and a more

[137] While e.g. the TV market in Portugal is marked by very few evening news programmes in which EU coverage finds itself in competition with a multitude of other news for the agenda, the U.K. and Germany offer a variety of late night political magazines and therefore additional opportunities for reporting.

transnationalised angle in the second, notably with regard to specialised newspapers. At the same time spokespersons frequently referred to higher levels of journalistic "spin" and editorial opinion in these publications. This was at times seen by respondents as critical against the backdrop of the dominant opinion-leading position that some of these elite newspapers take in the European political dialogue.

Spokespersons broadly acknowledged the existence of a "communication gap" between an elite audience and a general public audience on the European level. In their routine work, this distinction shines through in that their information provision inherently needs to cater for separate information demands at the same time: the need for detailed information by a specialised journalistic clientele on the one hand, and very basic explanations of policy contents for generalists on the other hand. A task that was widely perceived as challenging, even more so under the conditions of multiple languages and translations used in the process.

Suggestions for improving the efficiency of media relations included a further "presidentialisation" of communication, i.e. centralising communication under the authority of the President and endowing messages with a stronger political stance. While the "going local" strategy of the Communication White Paper was seen as useful, particularly in the context of the representations adapting of communications from Brussels to a local context and their role as "early warning systems" on the ground, the comparatively weak political standing of representations in the member states effectively limits their role as agenda setters for European topics in the local media. Last but not least, a number of respondents asked for an improved media monitoring system with regard to audiovisual content in order to raise awareness for such coverage in the 10 o'clock strategy meeting.

VI Conclusion

Europe, because of its ever-changing structure, has been labelled a "laboratory of World History" (Weidenfeld 1999: 15). As such, it provides a seemingly endless source for academic analysis and comment across disciplines. Yet, as a research object *sui generis*, it is by its uniqueness that matters become more complicated, in particular because comparisons to the familiar nation state framework often turn out to offer inadequate yardsticks to the multilevel nature of the EU system. The hybrid form of national and supranational governance in most cases prevents definite and clear-cut assumptions about issues such as legitimacy, participation or indeed the European Public Sphere.

> "As analysts of the EU we naturally seek to find simple, sweeping and all-embracing answers to the complexity and the scale of the contemporary project but, while the search for patterns and regularities is a useful heuristic exercise, sometimes we simply need to recognize that the answers in a complex plural polity may well themselves be plural and complex." (Taggart 2006: 23)

The question of the European "communication deficit" is a case in point: as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, it touches on insights in communication as well as political science research, but also cognitive psychology and the realm of reception studies. As a general starting point, Latzer/Saurwein (cf. 2006: 10) have noted that the political system and the media system have taken turns in blaming each other for the persisting lack of communication between European elites and European citizens. However, political participation must be seen as an interactive game where three domains have to play their part: for the emergence of a European discourse the political system can contribute via institutional reforms that promote opportunities for participation and responsiveness, the media system by providing a public platform for debate, criticism and control, and, not least, the European citizens through their interest and general willingness to participate.

In view of an already rich body of research on the EU media system, the present study has specifically focussed on the part of the political system and the role that the EU-Commission's spokesperson service plays in this process. Within the mix of political communication activities, the 27 spokespersons represent the decisive actors as far as the EU's relationship with the media is concerned. Given their impact and scope, the media are seen as the most effective instrument in order to provide citizens with information on the EU. Since among the final recipients of media products a differentiation can be made between several audiences, the findings of the study also contain several implications with regard to the nature and role of those audiences, as well as the prospects of new means of communication.

Empirical Results: Media Relations in the EU – A twofold Affair

The empirical analysis has revealed a number of factors that have exceedingly practical effects on how the information flow between EU institutions and the media essentially differs from a domestic setting. Taking these insights into account, is the "communication deficit" the result of a deficient communication policy on the part of the EU as suggested by some critics? The answer is "yes" and "no". "Yes", because the EU's communication initiatives such as the "White Paper on Communication Policy" or "Communicating Europe in Partnership" have apparently not succeeded in achieving the objective of communicating the EU to its citizens, most notably they have not reached their declared aim of supporting the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty or increasing participation in the 2009 European elections. The European Union, as the media echo provoked by the failed ratification of the Lisbon Reform Treaty in Ireland has vividly brought back to memory, seems as distant from its citizens as ever. The strategy of "communicating with citizens" by way of new technological means such as blogs

or online consultations, but also via the organisation of "public debates" promoted and launched with unrealistically high expectations, is in reality limited to a few interested people with already extraordinarily high levels of motivation and knowledge about EU matters.

"No", because such criticism has an implicit tendency to argue from a nation state perspective where certain formulas for "successful" political communication have been established, e.g. the frequent appearances of political leaders on TV, dominating the debate in widely circulating tabloids or the rapid rebuttal of attack messages from the opposition. Measuring the European Union's performance against the record of domestic news management activities will invariably lead to the conclusion that EU political communication is deficient and ineffective because it fails to make a lasting impression on the citizens' perception or succumbs to the "blame game" and "credit-taking" strategies of national politicians and media actors. The charge of deficient EU political communication also fails to take into account that the European Union provides essentially different structural conditions for politicians and their political communication specialists and that these conditions make it significantly more difficult to communicate EU affairs to the general public. The multilevel reality of the EU institutional setting requires a form of political communication that needs to take into account both supranational *and* domestic communication logics.

Supranational communication logic: the EU, as a political system consisting of 27 member states and operating in 23 different languages, produces legislative acts for more than 490 million Europeans on a daily basis. This requires a highly efficient communication cycle that allows stakeholders in- and outside Brussels to be effectively informed and, on the basis of this information, provide input to the legislative process. As this input on the EU level is primarily delivered by a transnational expert sphere, this clientele naturally forms the centre of attention for EU political communication actors. In other words: information provided by spokespersons first of all needs to satisfy the information demand of

stakeholders in Brussels and in the 27 member states that are directly or indirectly involved in the EU decision-making routines. Political communication in the EU thereby needs to reflect the complexity of the interplay of the member states on the intergovernmental level and their relations with the supranational realm of the EU institutions. The communication process therefore tends to be inherently geared towards the in-depth information of experts which fulfil a more immediate role in the day-to-day EU policy cycle. In this context, providing valuable information for an expert audience presents not only a foremost and legitimate task of any communication activity, but from a functional point of view might even take precedence over more general information objectives in the day-to-day reality of information provision.

Domestic communication logic: the essential role of experts for the EU policy process notwithstanding, the European project depends on the (at least diffuse) support of the European public. It is the very essence of the "permissive consensus" that has been built on citizens' general goodwill towards the EU. The permissive consensus thereby contains a time-lag dimension: it requires a basic trust in the decisions taken on the European level in the expectation of desirable policy outputs. Trust is "credited" to European policy actors as long as their actions produce benefits in the future which then "pay back" the trust invested in them. In this context, the communication of policy outputs becomes a key prerogative. In the course of the increasing use of referenda on European Treaties, however, citizens are expected to invest considerable advancements in trust without seeing immediate tangible benefits. This is where the *a posteriori* logic of the permissive consensus falls short and where public approval must be won *a priori* by way of a debate with convincing arguments. The present study, in line with suggestions made by other authors (e.g. Brüggemann 2009: 277), indicates that the emergence of such a debate is more readily achieved through improving the public impact of media relations with regard to the promotion of European topics in the routine coverage of widely consumed mass media outlets, notably

television media rather than through public relations campaigns.[138] The EU-Commission, in its White Paper, follows a similar line with its "going local" strategy and by highlighting the role of representations and their media work. Yet the study revealed two factors that appear to act as barriers to this assumption: the remoteness of representations from the central institutions in Brussels and the difficulty of translating expert sphere communication from the "Brussels bubble" to a form of communication that is digestible and meaningful for a local audience. The second factor again relates to audiovisual communication: the "going local" strategy cannot compensate for the lack of familiar faces representing the EU in the member states. It is clear that Heads of Representations as "EU ambassadors" only play a subordinate role in the domestic discourse because they are essentially unknown to the public.[139]

Theoretical Implications: The Decisive Role of Perception – An Underestimated Factor

Whereas on the macro level, the institutional setting of the European Union and its implications for the (non-)emergence of an inclusive public communicative space has been the subject of intensive debate, and on the meso level, media organisations have been examined with regard to the extent and quality of their input to the European debate, the audiences' interest and willingness has so far attracted only scant attention. This appears to be surprising at least in the light of Eurobarometer surveys that reflect a continuing apathy – if not total ignorance –

[138] Studies have shown that „soft news" in principle, can also involve less interested recipients (cf. Baum 2002), yet the EU's lack of familiar reference points and high complexity levels would also apply to this format.

[139] EU-representatives at times seem to have a higher recognition in some non-EU member states, e.g. Switzerland, due to their "exclusiveness". In the domestic setting, EU-related matters are frequently commented upon by national minsters who participate in Council meetings.

regarding European politics, and this despite measureable increases in media coverage. A key component in explaining why the European debate remains segmented and confined to an elite group rather than the European public might be found on the micro level of the individual citizen and the mode of his or her reception of EU-related media content.

While a great number of studies have shown time and again that factual knowledge of the ordinary citizens about the political proceedings in their country is fairly bleak (e.g. cf. Page/Shapiro 1992: 9), the degree of knowledge about EU issues in the general public, or indeed about its impact on national policies, appears to be almost non-existent – one of the symptoms of the "communication deficit". Yet, one should be careful not to overestimate the importance of factual knowledge, when it might be more essential for people to understand the general underlying rationale.[140] While Page/Shapiro claim that this is the case for citizens in the U.S. because of the effects of accumulative learning over time, this is where the EU fundamentally differs from domestic settings: the EU presents a dynamic system marked by a constant change of structure, political actors and competencies.[141] This also presents less scope and opportunity for the development of lasting "cues" and "hooks" that would allow for an easier processing of information. The EU offers considerably fewer anchors for heuristic judgements compared to the member states. Here, familiar reference systems have

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[140] Page/Shapiro have therefore concluded that "[T]here would be more reason to be discouraged if it could be shown that the public failed to understand more critical matters; or that it acquired blatantly incorrect information when routinely offered the correct facts; or that the public had no capacity to learn over time as particular issues and political figures became more prominent and important" (Page/Shapiro 1992: 12).

[141] Framing research has shown that the longer frames are used, the more stable they become and the less prone they are for events that are inconsistent (Scheufele/Brosius 1999: 427). As an entity in a process of constant change, the EU is in a weaker position in comparison to more stable "nation state frames" with regard to establishing a "corporate identity". For the concept of nation states as "brands" cf. Anholt (2007).

developed in the course of decades, in some instances even centuries. They allow for a reduction of complexity and, in most cases, present also those citizens with alternatives for political choice that take only limited interest in the political process. This is not least the case because domestic reference systems enable "elite cues" to be taken up by the general public when confronted with questions of choice: even in the absence of a deeper understanding of the political setting in a given country, simple cognitive links can be drawn between e.g. "the Bush administration" and "the war in Iraq", "Chancellor Merkel" and "the CDU government" or "President Obama" and "the reform of the health system".

It is at this point that the multilevel structure of the EU, marked by an intricate decision-making process, a high number of political actors and languages, prevents an efficient reduction of complexity to easy-to-understand cognitive anchors. The tendency is amplified by the absence of a common identity and culture in as much as this fact also implies the absence of a common reference system for the perception of EU-related issues. The arguments listed here thus relate less to sociological concepts of a common European identity and participation, but rather to matters of reception under conditions of high complexity. The complexity of the EU setting is a key component with regard, firstly, to the way media select and frame EU topics and, secondly, to how audience(s) perceive those issues in the media. Regarding the first point, the findings of the case study suggest that high complexity levels lead to a situation where EU topics lend themselves more to a specialised print media and less to audiovisual media with a broader audience target. Regarding the second point, the present study is not suited to provide direct empirical evidence as examining this question would require a separate reception analysis. However on the basis of the assumptions made above one could form a speculative hypothesis: even in cases where EU topics appear in the general public media, they are less likely to be perceived by a general public audience, because of insufficient motivation to read an article on a complex EU topic or to consciously follow a news report on TV.

The perplexity of the European decision-making process[142] also prevents "elite cues" from trickling down to the general public, enabling "blame game" strategies on the national level. The implications for European Public Sphere research are that if previous research has indicated a lack of public interest in the EU as a result of scarce opportunities for participation, cognitive psychology suggests that this fact might be more closely linked to matters of perception and a lack of familiar cues on the supranational level that would provide citizens with "short-cuts" for information processing rather than being the product of an alleged lack of democratic participation. Additional research in this area would also greatly contribute to explaining the paradox why a "Europeanisation" of coverage over time also in the tabloid media has not resulted in measurably higher interest, knowledge and participation on the part of the general public.

Practical Implications for Future EU Communication Policies

If, in view of these insights, it must be reasonably – if reluctantly – concluded that the motivational threshold that European citizens need to overcome in order to engage with EU policy issues proves to be just too high for most citizens most of the time, then what are the consequences for the political communication activities of EU institutions and what are the prospects for overcoming the "communication deficit"?

As far as the institutional framework is concerned, the European Union's structure is not likely to undergo a dramatic process of simplification in the future, and its inherent complexity has to be accepted as a given, in particular as the

[142] As mentioned in chapter IV.1.3, it is important to note that this lack of transparency is a result of the complexity of the process, and not one of public access. Access to information about the proposals in the different legislative stages is often more readily granted by the EU-institutions than is the case in most member states (cf. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union Art. 45).

current structure is the result of an evolutionary process that in the course of more than 50 years has proved its reliability.[143] In an organisation with now 27 member states it could however well be that the "old" model of European integration, marked by a high degree of consensus among a relatively small number of member states will increasingly give way to a "new" model that is marked by a differentiated process of integration in which some states may choose to move ahead faster while others take opt-outs in certain designated policy areas. Countries that constitutionally rely on the use of referenda will probably find it more difficult to keep up with the pace of integration of countries in which the national parliaments ratify European treaties. If further integration is desired in those countries, the challenge must be to win over the public with regard to those key decisions via improved communication with European citizens. The model of communication used in this study assumes that the multilevel system erects communication barriers which promote a further segmentation along the lines of European experts on the one hand and the general public on the other. These audiences differ not only by way of different levels of knowledge and media use but also by way of their *functional* input: while expert audiences are instrumental in maintaining the quality of the EU policy output and thereby contribute to the system's output legitimacy, the general public provides input-legitimacy in the form of public support for e.g. further integration and enlargement. The EU's "communication deficit" must therefore – from a functional point of view – be regarded as constituting a deficit primarily on the latter part. The decisive

[143] Cf. Patzelt (2001) in a critical review of seeping simplification measures and on the interrelations between „complexity", „political knowledge" and the „disenchantment with politics" in Germany: „Should we then adapt our political system according to the imaginations of citizens or rather their political knowledge about the complexity of our democracy? If this had produced mainly blunders, the answer would be clear. However, our institutions have essentially proved their worth" (cited in: *Die Zeit* 22.02.2001).

challenge for EU communication policy is thus to improve communication with the general public *without neglecting the information demands of the expert sphere*.

This is naturally a question of resources. The spokesperson service, on the basis of limited resources, has been instrumental in successfully managing a communication cycle that allows a "grand coalition" of 27 different member states to produce joint decisions in Brussels, despite all national cultural and linguistic differences – a substantial communicative achievement. Specialised European media and information services such as the *Financial Times*, *European Voice*, *EurActiv*, thematic European newsletters, but also specific sections of leading European broadsheets play an important functional role in this process as they act as prime information sources, points of reference and catalysts of will-formation for stakeholders in the policy process all over Europe. As the provision of information to these key media outlets is a core task, a lack of resources in the SPP can therefore be assumed to be above all to the detriment of the general public audience. Although the White Paper on Communication Policy has not (yet) shown too many encouraging results as far as "grand" communication initiatives are concerned, spokespersons have frequently acknowledged that the Barroso Commission has taken up the task of shifting media relations more towards the public domain, particularly via enhanced efforts in the audiovisual sector. This appears to be a valid strategy, because TV as a medium offers "chance encounters" with European topics to people who would normally not have the intrinsic motivation to read about EU-related issues in the press. The cumulative effect of such encounters may well contribute to higher levels of interest and understanding if consistently applied. In this context, audiovisual communication pursues an awareness-building objective rather than an opinion-forming objective as, for instance, performed by the elite press. The long-term goal must be to raise attention levels for EU topics which, in a second step, may

change perception and information-processing patterns to the extent that opportunities for a meaningful debate can emerge.

This lack of visibility in the audiovisual media is on the one hand a structural problem of EU communication, i.e. the result of a lack of drama, a complicated decision-making process and actors with little incentive to go public (cf. Koopmans/Pfetsch 2003: 9). This being the case, the opportunities of TV coverage could nevertheless be considerably enhanced assuming that the media may be willing to show more TV coverage if the information provided on the part of the EU were of better quality, i.e. media-trained Commissioners with an ability to speak in soundbites and to explain complicated EU policy in simple terms. The case study has revealed that a certain neglect of audiovisual media in the past has not least arisen from the absence of an effective audiovisual media monitoring system being in place. Whereas the daily press report counts as one of the most important documents because it can be seen as a sort of output assessment of the work of spokespersons in the form of favourable or unfavourable articles (and a source of potential peer respect), there has been no equivalent type of report for the audiovisual media. It does not come as a surprise, that, as a consequence, there has been a generally lower importance attached to audiovisual items. Spokespersons responded that the introduction of such a report would boost efforts in audiovisual media relations.[144] Depending on the portfolio, there are at times, however, other reasons suspected for the lower output of audiovisual coverage: appearing on the audiovisual media does not in some cases earn as much peer reward from colleagues as featuring in the written press. This is firstly because of the more "highbrow" intellectual nature of the opinion-leading written press in comparison to the more "downmarket" television media. Secondly, spokespersons frequently mentioned that their respective Commissioners counted

[144] Establishing such a service has so far proved difficult, mainly because it involves high costs. The increasing convergence of audiovisual service and the internet with the provision of news programme databases may however considerably reduce this problem in the future.

it as one of the spokespersons highest achievements if the Commissioners appeared in elite media such as the *Financial Times*.[145] Here a change in perception regarding the wider scope and impact of general public media could lead to an increased willingness of European top decision-makers to make greater use of audiovisual means of communication.

Regarding the general style of media relations, format and presentation of media stimuli play an important role in this process. Through accentuation of news values selection processes can be triggered – with regard to journalists *and* audiences (cf. Eilders/Wirth 1999: 37). Because EU information provision has in the past been largely targeted at an expert audience, the established practice has frequently been characterised by a rather technical style of presentation, reflected by press releases that are hard to digest for the uninitiated reader. Communication with the public has in so far been neglected, as communicating European decisions to the general public requires a different style of communication, i.e. a communicative approach that is "simpler" and more "down to earth". In spite of improvements in the past, this tradition of communication in a specialised EU jargon still continues to have an effect: one of the reasons for this is that Brussels-based spokespersons rarely experience direct responses from a general public audience. Press officers in the representations, in contrast, are frequently provided with a "reality check". Stronger feedback lines could further raise the awareness of spokespersons at the centre for the perception of policy issues by the public in the member states.

The European Union's significance in the future will not least depend upon to what extent the public is able to accept and understand the activities of its institutions. As shown, the EU's structure presents political communication actors with a natural limit as to what they can reasonably achieve in comparison to their

[145] An assessment that stands in marked contrast to former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's quip that all he needed for government was "Bild, BamS und Glotze" – the tabloid media and TV.

national counterparts. While Commission spokespersons can realistically not accomplish the same "success rates" with regard to setting the agenda, there are, however, encouraging signs in the course of recent developments. The "going local" strategy with a shift from a Brussels-based information policy towards an information policy focussing on the local representations is in principle a valid approach, but not a universal remedy: it is the Commission's spokesperson service, because of its proximity to the key actors in Brussels, that forms the natural point of reference for the media, and not the national representations who necessarily operate at a distance from the place where decisions are made. Although the representations can certainly provide leverage in the coverage of smaller local papers and regional TV-stations, it should not be underestimated that even these need first-hand information and prominent figures that attract attention, but are often not available on the local level. In this context, a greater involvement of the Commissioners themselves as "EU-ambassadors" would greatly help in boosting recognition of EU policies on the local level by giving them a human face. In recognition of this fact, the Treaty of Lisbon has introduced two new European "top jobs" and has thereby answered the calls for more personalisation also on the highest level. The position of "EU President" and "High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy" will doubtlessly introduce a greater degree of "face recognition" of the EU on the international stage and subsequently in the media. Supplementing the efforts in the audiovisual sector, the European Commission has also launched a number of new audiovisual services such as a pan-European TV and radio network in 2009.

In spite of the consensual mode of operation, political drama does take place in the EU. It is, however, not necessarily confined to traditional conflict lines *within* an institution, but *between* institutions, e.g. during the period of public hearings of Commissioners designate before the European Parliament. Instead of streamlining political communication efforts of the European institutions, a discourse could be promoted by more inter-institutional opposition. Although the

European Commission represents a somewhat "neutral" position as preserving European interests, its role is not apolitical. Several spokespersons explicitly suggested that the European Commission should take a more political stance, namely towards the other institutions as well as towards the governments in member states. A more self-confident Commission could also render national "blame game" strategies less effective and strengthen the European perspective. The politicisation has doubtlessly progressed: in 2004 there was, for the first time, a political battle for the position of Commission president and the parliamentary hearings of the Commissioners designate in 2010 have drawn an increasing number of interested observes from the media and the public.

Finally, since the reflection period in the wake of the referenda in France and The Netherlands, there has been a renewed call for a "Europe of Results". The idea is to focus on the communication of practical benefits that EU policies deliver to citizens on a daily basis and has been prominently advocated by Commission President José Manuel Barroso, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Sørensen 2008: 18). Interestingly, the focus on results presents a focus primarily on output legitimacy goals, not on participation. For all the buzz created by communication initiatives around a European Public Sphere by means of which the EU wants to engages itself in a "dialogue" with citizens, one could wonder with only a mild overtone of provocation as to whether a strategy towards a "new permissive consensus" would seem to be a more efficient strategy in order to reduce the "communication deficit". The past two decades have been guided by the general principle of "participation at all costs" – measured against the fairly modest success of this approach, there is a strong case for paying renewed attention to the opportunities of output legitimacy concepts and the involvement of the electronic mass media in this process.

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Appendices

- **Topic Guide**
- **List of Interviewees and Codes**
- **Interview Transcripts (in chronological order)**